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**Transcending the Binary?: Gay Men's Perspectives  
on Transgender Men**

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**Transcending the Binary?: Gay Men's Perspectives on  
Transgender Men**

**by**

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**Thesis**

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## **Dedication**

To my wife and best friend, Lindsey.

Your love, support, and wild spirit keep me grounded.

## **Acknowledgements**

First and foremost, thank you Christine Williams for your humor, support, time, feedback, mentorship, and intellectual guidance. I am deeply grateful for all you have done for me. Thank you, Gloria Gonzalez-Lopez for always wanting the best for me and for the consistent support. I would not have come to UT Austin had you not pushed me. My friends, I do not think I could survive academia without you, and for that, I am truly thankful. Thank you, Raka Ray for always believing in me. I would not be where I am today if it was not for your faith in me as an undergraduate. Lastly, thank you to the men who agreed to participate in this project. Without them, this project would not have come to fruition.

## **Abstract**

### **Transcending the Binary?: Gay Men's Perspectives on Transgender Men**

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2016

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With the burgeoning visibility of transgender rights in the United States, questions remain regarding how the mainstream LGBT movement will continue to integrate transgender people. In this thesis, I focus on the perspectives of cisgender gay men about transgender men within their communities to understand how divisions between these groups may stymie the LGBT movement going forward. Therefore, the guiding questions for this thesis are: 1) Do gay cisgender men view transgender men as friends and as potential sexual partners? 2) How do gay men manage their identity as gay men when they have been with transgender men in romantic relationships or in sexual encounters? To answer these general questions, I conducted a qualitative study using in-depth interviews with 15 men, in San Francisco, California, who self-identified as gay or queer. Focusing on masculinities theory, I uncovered three main barriers in these men's lives that shape the possibility of integrating transgender men within their communities. First, I show that these men grappled with defining manhood, maleness, and gayness between

biological or constructivist discourse which created tensions for being able to integrate transgender men within gay communities. Secondly, these men reshaped a sexual history that included people assigned female at birth as a mechanism for the creation of a gay identity. Lastly, the requirements of doing gender (West and Zimmerman 1987) facilitate the invisibility of transgender men in social spaces; for cisgender gay men, especially when faced with sexual desire for transgender men experienced a *vagina panic*. These men's narratives, reflected in this thesis, highlight the restrictiveness of essentialist discourse, the LGBT movement's discourse which upholds essentialism, and hegemonic masculinity. All three work in tandem to discount transgender men as a part of the gay male community and, in doing so, creates barriers for possible social and political connections.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

In the United States, transgender people and the transgender movement are having their moment in the sun. The transgender community now has unprecedented additions to celebrity status (e.g. Laverne Cox, the Wachowski sisters, and Janet Mock), media attention, especially on youth, and protective legislations for transgender people in cities across the country. Even with more visibility, however, major concerns abound for the transgender community. Besides the ongoing risk of violence in sexual encounters, transgender people face multiple barriers to housing, employment, access to healthcare, not to mention the high risk of suicide (Grant et al. 2012).

Since the fight for marriage equality has now come to a close, many have wondered if transgender rights will be the next frontier in the LGBT movement. In this thesis, I investigate relationships between cisgender gay men and transgender men. I seek to understand how divisions between these groups may stymie the LGBT movement going forward. Through in-depth interviews with cisgender gay men, I explore how discourses on sex, gender, and sexuality promote the continued exclusion of transgender men from personal and political networks.

In this chapter, I begin by situating this project theoretically. Then I outline my methods and research questions. I also include a section to discuss the lessons and challenges I experienced during fieldwork in San Francisco. Lastly, I provide an outline for the organization of this thesis.

## **Theoretical Frameworks**

This project contributes to a vast body of work that examines masculinity, gay men's lives, and the concepts of sex, gender, and sexuality. In this section, I provide my major theoretical frameworks and a review of the literature to situate this project within the ongoing sociological conversation about gender and sexuality. In the first part, highlight the three major theoretical frames that contextualize my findings. In the second section, I outline the literature on gay men's lives. Lastly, I review literature that examines sex, gender, and sexuality. Throughout this section, I explain how this project contributes to the existing literature on masculinities and sex, gender, and sexuality.

### **Hegemonic Masculinity**

R.W. Connell (2005) illustrates how patriarchy legitimizes violence towards women and other forms of masculinity because of hegemonic masculinity's superiority over them. Patriarchy is how society is structured where hegemonic masculinity are acts/actions that reify patriarchy. Violence is a part of the system of domination, but simultaneously a sign of its weakness: intimidation is not necessary if its legitimacy is not questionable. With this formulation of domination, three different types of relations exist for the structure of gender. Power relations in contemporary western culture is the subordination of women to the rule of men (patriarchy). Relations of production show the gendered division of labor turns capital into a gendered form since the accumulation of capital is related to reproduction. Cathetic relations are the ways in which subject invest emotional energy; the practices which shape this energy is gendered. Gender is present in all aspects of society. Consequently, all social practices are constructed, alongside race

and ethnicity, through the prism of gender. Gender and masculinity are understood through other social structures, which in turn cannot be understood without appealing to gender.

Hegemonic masculinity maintains itself through an overlap between a cultural ideal and institutional power which is defined against femininity and other types of masculinity. However, hegemonic masculinity can be challenged by other forms of masculinity. First, there is subordinate masculinity (e.g. homosexual masculinity) is assume to be congruent with femininity (e.g. anything not masculine). Second, complicit masculinity elucidates the fact that though few men completely meet the definition of hegemonic masculinity, all men nevertheless enjoy its benefits (the patriarchal dividend). Complicit masculinity aspires to be hegemonic and takes part in sustaining hegemonic masculinity without completely belonging to it. Lastly, marginalized masculinity characterizes a masculinity that exhibits hegemonic masculine qualities but ultimately oppressed due to qualities such as race and class. This system of hegemony/ subordination, cooperation and marginalization/empowerment is a dynamic system of practices, not identities, and any gender-oriented analysis must, therefore, account for developments in these relationships.

Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity has been widely researched and cited since its inception more than 20 years ago. However, one aspect of Connell's theory – cathexis – has rarely been engaged with in literature. Connell argues that cathexis is a main part of how hegemonic masculinity reproduces itself in society. Cathexis, as conceptualized by Connell, follows a Freudian perspective which conceives desire as

emotional energy, specifically erotic desire, invested in gendered bodies. While Connell focuses on the hegemonic structure of heterosexism and its gendered consequences, I focus on how gay cisgender men's investment in their erotic relations with men reflect the ways in which they understand sex, gender, and sexuality.

### **Re-coupling Sex and Gender**

Literature in the sociology of gender has, for a long time, worked to create a clear distinction between sex and gender as socially constructed concepts. This line of argument posits that sex is understood to be the biological characteristics that society uses to label people as either male, female, or intersex. On the other hand, gender is argued to be the socially constructed behaviors, attitudes, and ways of being which are assigned to men and women. Men and women understand themselves to be gendered bodies and beings because of their sex assigned at birth. Therefore, this project centers on how cisgender gay men's conceptualization of manhood and gayness derive from their sex assigned at birth, with a penis for external genitalia. Like Springer et al. (2012) and Hankivsky et al. (2015), in this thesis I argue that investigating the ways in which desire is socially constructed and perceived cannot be completely understood if sex and gender are uncoupled.

### **Gay Men's Friendships and Politics**

In *Gay Men's Friendships: Invincible Communities*, Peter Nardi (1999) illustrates how gay male friendships can function as an alternative (or "chosen") family. Nardi shows that these friendships simultaneously reproduce the support provided by biological kin but can also be a form of resistance to hegemonic masculinity through gay identity

affirmation and cultural cultivation. For Nardi, gay men's friendships go beyond the interpersonal – they are political statements that challenge the social construction of heteronormative family arrangements. In this paper, I extend Nardi's focus on friendships as sites for political change and political opportunity for communities by examining gay cisgender men's views on transgender men within the gay male community.

### **Previous Literatures**

Gender and sexuality scholars understand inequality to be interactional, structural, and complex. Researchers who study cisgender gay men demonstrate how sex, gender, and sexuality shape access to opportunity. In this section, I outline previous literature that highlight the experiences of cisgender gay men's lives, contemporary LGBT movement discourse, and transgender men's lives. The first section discusses previous literature on the impact of hegemonic masculinity and compulsory heterosexuality in cisgender gay men's lives. The next section highlights the historical trajectory of LGBT movement discourse and its investment in biologically rooted arguments for the normalization of homosexuality. Lastly, I highlight the current literature on transgender men. Therefore, this project extends these literatures by examining how cisgender gay men perceive transgender men within their various communities.

### **Cisgender Gay Men, Masculinity, and Community Ties**

Within masculinities literature, scholarly work focusing on gay issues have covered a plethora of topics. These topics have generated immense knowledge for how heterosexism, patriarchy, and hegemonic masculinity operate and influence the lives of



cisgender gay men in the Western world. However, many of these studies lack integrating transgender men as a part of the gay male community at large. Therefore, this paper fills a gap and extends masculinities literature by examining the ways in which cisgender gay men understand transgender men as a part of their community.

Pascoe (2011) illustrates how homophobia and the use of the word “fag” for adolescents are about the regulation of gender and sexuality, rather than just tied to sexual orientation. Compulsory heterosexuality (Rich 1980), or the social construction of heterosexuality as the default norm ties directly to sexual orientation. The use of the word ‘fag’ operates as a mechanism to control and produce heterosexual boys and in doing so, subordinates any behaviors deemed not masculine. Slevin and Linneman (2009) highlight how the gay male community’s culture and community values hegemonic masculine standards of youth and heterosexuality creating standards for gay men, regardless of age, rooted in heterosexism and hegemonic masculinity.

In a community that is currently grappling with the ever-more visibility of transgender men, these standards are still the limits within which acceptance for a gay identity can be met. For cisgender gay men, it is possible that the fag discourse and the homophobia they have experienced in their lives not only influenced their childhood and adolescence; compulsory heterosexuality and homophobia can continue to influence their outlook as gay men and for the gay community as a whole as well. The respondents in this project highlight how heterosexism and hegemonic masculinity effect their views on gay identity, gay culture, and the limits of the inclusion of transgender men.

Han (2007) highlights how the gay community at large is socially constructed as

white and middle/upper class. His analysis show that white middle/upper-class gay life permeated popular culture (e.g. movies, magazines, music) and reflected in positions of leadership within gay organizations. Han argues the centering of gay community life on whiteness and middle/upper class aesthetics creates an environment that neglects the lives and priorities of gay men and women of color. This project adds to the conversation of erasure of different communities within the larger “gay community.” I do so through an examination of how the social construction of gay identity influences the ability for cisgender gay men to include transgender men within their communities. Hennen’s (2008) *Faeries, Bears, and Leathermen* focused on gay cisgender men’s relationship to femininity and masculinity but also highlighted that there was a space in which pansexual (a person who is not sexually limited to a certain sex, gender, or gender identity) sex occurred. This project picks up where Hennen’s book ends but takes a slightly different angle. I examine the same social and sexual spaces and communities highlighted by Hennen and focus on how cisgender gay men’s discourse on masculinity and manhood work to incorporate or inhibit the inclusion of transgender men within gay male social and sexual communities.

Stacey (2004) argues that gay male cruising, or causal sex, is not just an avenue gay men use for sexual satisfaction. Stacey shows that cruising facilitates the creation of the family of choice (forging kinship ties) and a community, as well as opportunities for social mobility. Furthermore, Stacey shows that cruising for gay men also facilitates more crossings of social boundaries (race, class, age, religion, and educational status) than heterosexual relationships. Berkowitz (2012) highlights how cisgender gay men rely

upon dominant ideologies and discourses on gender, kinship, biology, the family, and responsibility. Rather than subvert or transgress these discourses, Berkowitz shows that they reinforce them due to the stigma and scrutiny they face as cisgender gay men. This project adds to the conversation regarding sex as an avenue for intimacy, kinship, and social mobility. Respondents illustrate how cisgender gay men's reliance on dominant ideologies, especially for gender and biology, place limits on how they construct manhood, gayness, and in doing so, prevents forging ties with transgender men.

### **LGBT Movement Discourse**

Throughout the LGBT movement's history in the U.S., there has been a tension between two ideological camps: one that pushes for normalization and inclusion while the other pulls away from categorization and blending into sexual social norms. However, Steven Seidman and Chet Meeks (2011) have argued that, beginning with the early activism in the 1950s of the Mattachine Society (or the Homophile movement), the goals have always been centered on normalization. Watershed moments of queer liberation, such as the Stonewall Riots of 1969, which were characterized by a strong coalition of diverse identities, seem at odds with the normalizing tendency of the increasingly institutionalized movement (Stryker 2004). These queer liberation bursts which focuses on inclusivity and diversity within the history of the LGBT movement, I argue, does not change the picture of a differentiated and divided movement seeking normative recognition. These tensions are consistent with findings of social movement literature on "boundary work," or the making and limiting the recognition of membership based on assumed shared experiences and identity, and facilitates in-group and out-group

definitions among members within a movement. Therefore, I look into the ways in which cisgender gay men create boundaries within their communities based on their understandings of sex, gender, and sexuality. Additionally, this project extends the investigation on the LGBT movement by focusing on how the historical emphasis on normalization shapes cisgender gay men's inclusion of transgender men.

Scholars have conceptualized the push for normalization within the mainstream as a mirroring of larger normative social norms. For example, Lisa Duggan (2002) argues the LGBT movement has internalized heteronormativity, constructing a parallel concept of homonormativity. Homonormativity places heterosexual paradigms and normative gender and gender expression constructs as the norm for the LGBT community. Complicating matters further, the formula of "LGBT," according to Jillian Weiss (2004), does not support the idea that there is a single community. Rather, she points out that the divisions between gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender people are steep and more significant to each other than to heterosexuals. Weiss argues that through education, desensitization, and embracing heteronormativity, over time, gays and lesbians have gained political success.

The homonormative focus changed the ways in which the LGBT movement participates politically. Amin Ghaziani (2011) illuminates the change in gay politics from one that had a "distinctive and defiant edge" to the current post-gay era which is focused on conservative issues such as marriage and adoption, inclusion in the armed forces, and employment non-discrimination. For Ghaziani, the "post-gay life" has two opposing movements: assimilation into the mainstream for a small segment of gays and the

proliferation of diversity in LGBT communities. This change from defiance to assimilation, according to Ghaziani, has changed collective identity construction from the oppositional stance of us “versus” them to an inclusionary stance of us “and” them, suggesting that LGBT activists are more driven to building bridges with the dominant group in society rather than creating boundaries between them. Focusing on the similarity with heterosexual people, LGBT movement discourse has created a way to become “normal” in society while simultaneously creating divisions within its diverse movement communities. This project adds to the conversation on fragmentation within the LGBT movement. I do this through investigating how LGBT movement discourse assists in creating or dismantling barriers for cisgender gay men’s inclusion of transgender men within their communities.

In contemporary discourse, “Born this Way” has become a ubiquitous framework, especially for lesbians and gay in the fight for equality in the U.S. (Jang and Lee 2014; Grzanka, Zeiders, and Miles 2015). Within the last 10 years, “born this way” discourse surfaced within the LGBT movement to argue, like Lady Gaga’s song, that being gay is not a choice; it is an inborn characteristic that is normal (Pfeffer 2014; Jang and Lee 2014; Grzanka, Zeiders, and Miles 2015). Though “born this way” discourse is relatively new within the LGBT movement, the trajectory from the movement’s beginnings with the Homophiles in the 1950s illustrates an overall tendency to rely heavily on biological arguments for the “naturalness” of homosexuality. However, Pfeffer (2014) points to how sexuality and gender are performative, fluid, and responsive to misrecognition. She highlights how social actors serve as arbiters of categorical orders as they accept or reject

others as belonging to particular sexual and gender categories or groups. Similar to Pfeffer, this project questions whether or not cisgender gay men illustrate LGBT movement discourse and focus on a biological argument for the ways in which they understand sex, gender, and sexuality.

### **The Conundrum of Transgender Men**

Some literature discusses the phenomenon of transgender sexuality; however, these works have not examined the perspectives of cisgender gay men who have social and sexual relationships with transgender men. Jason Cromwell's (1999) book shed light on some perspectives of transgender men who have emotional and sexual relationships with cisgender gay men; this project adds to the conversations started by the transgender men in Cromwell's book with the inclusion of gay cisgender men's perspectives about their relationships with transgender men.

Schilt and Westbrook (2009) show that for transgender people, context matters for how their "doing gender" is perceived. In public, their gender presentation is accepted, assessed, and held accountable to the gender binary. In private, their gender identity is held suspect and linked to their biological sex, revealing the power of heteronormativity on regulating how transgender individuals can "do" gender. This project picks up from Schilt and Westbrook and extends the focus on how "gender normals" view transgender men. More specifically, I examine cisgender gay men's discourses on transgender men's desirability as friends and lovers. As such, this project seeks to examine how cisgender gay men understand their social and sexual spheres, as well as how these spaces incorporate transgender men.

## **Research Questions**

Investigating how gay cisgender men incorporate transgender men in their social and sexual networks has theoretical and social implications. With the heightened national attention for transgender people in the United States and the LGBT movement's turn away from focusing primarily on lesbian and gay issues, understanding how gay cisgender men view transgender men can shed light on some of the barriers that can affect the LGBT movement's future trajectory. Furthermore, this study provides a new lens on the ways in which the LGBT community intermingle socially and sexually with each other. In doing so, this study also highlights the ways in which gender, sex, and sexuality as separate social concepts are inherently intertwined and inseparable. I focus on how gay cisgender men's gender identity and sexual orientation influence their choice of friends and lovers. Therefore, the research questions that guide this thesis are: (1) Do gay cisgender men view transgender men as friends and as potential sexual partners? (2) How do gay men manage their identity as gay men when they have been with transgender men in romantic relationships or in sexual encounters?

## **Methodology**

### **The Research Project**

For this project, I conducted in-person, in-depth interviews with IRB approval from the University of Texas, Austin, during the summer of 2015 with self-identified gay or queer cisgender men in San Francisco, California. San Francisco was chosen as the research site because it has been a bastion of LGBT social and political movements at

least since the end of WWII. Furthermore, there is a long-standing history of a visible transgender community that has also worked alongside their LGB counterparts for LGBT rights. As such, San Francisco is a good location to investigate the ways in which various dominant discourses surrounding sexuality and sexual politics serve to construct and reconstruct the boundaries between these two groups of men.

Recruitment occurred using a key informant in the Bay Area as well as through outreach materials (e.g. fliers) at locations where gay/queer men socialize, such as bars and community centers. I conducted the interviews between June and July of 2015. The shortest interview lasted 35 minutes and the longest ran for 1.5 hours. The interviews averaged approximately 1 hour and were semi-structured. The locations of the interviews were dependent upon where the interviewee preferred to meet, and included coffee shops, restaurants, parks, and interviewee residences.

Interviewees were explicitly told before the interview that they could skip any question(s) and stop the interview at any time, hopefully establishing a more mutual relationship with these cisgender gay men and giving them some control over the interview process (González-López 2011). After each interview, I immediately wrote a quick journal entry, detailing the participant's demeanor and personality during the interview and my interactions with the informant (Taylor and Bogdan 1998; Esterberg 2001). These brief journal entries also helped shape how I engaged with and understood my informant's experiences and the data.

I interviewed 15 men between the ages of 21 and 58, with a mean age of 42. Of the 15 men interviewed, 9 identified as white, 2 as Jewish, 2 as Latino, 1 as Chinese and



Polish, and 1 as Irish/Italian and Black/Puerto Rican. One interviewee completed a high school diploma, 3 had taken some college courses, 3 had completed an undergraduate degree, 6 interviewees completed a Master's degree, and 1 had a J.D. Informants identities were all self-identified; all informants' names have been changed to maintain anonymity.

Interviews covered the following topics: childhood history, sexual history and sexual identity, and their perspectives on transgender men in the gay male community. These interviews were recorded and later transcribed by myself. Initially, I coded by attaching labels to segments of the data, describing what each segment is about (Charmaz 2006). Then I wrote memos, which were my preliminary analytical notes about my data. I sought to uncover the tacit meanings within my informants' accounts of their experiences to find the intent of how and why my informants do certain things (Charmaz 2006). I continued this process while conducting my interviews trying to get more data related to these emerging categories. Interviews were continued until I reached theoretical saturation when my interviews yielded no new theoretical insights (Weiss 1994; Taylor and Bogdan 1998).

### **Qualitative Research and Self-Embodiment: Lessons and Challenges**

Qualitative approaches are at the center of sexualities research because they search for interpretative meaning within LGBT communities and approach sexualities as socially constructed, rather than an essential characteristic (Gamson 2000). Additionally, qualitative methods take as their epistemology that all knowledge is socially situated. With in-person interviews, I was able to identify emerging issues significant to my

interviewees' perspectives and experiences with transgender men that I followed up on with further probing questions to continue exploring these cisgender men's experiences. Accordingly, in-person interviews provided the ability to notice physical cues of the interviewees', which was useful data as well.

Ethnographic work was, initially, thought to be a possible method to incorporate for this thesis. However, it became evident very quickly that, like the cisgender gay men I interviewed, it is not always possible to “know” if someone is transgender in any given social setting. Attempting to do so clearly created ethical issues: what parameters were I going to use to label someone as a transgender man? Going to bars and community spaces for the gay community also draws in a variety of people: gay, lesbian, straight, queer, transgender, non-binary, etc. Additionally, ethnographic work would not, for this project, illuminate how cisgender gay men think and feel about transgender men in gay community spaces. Survey methods allow for much less flexibility in the ways that questions are formed. Using interviews created an environment in which respondents could express what they viewed as significant and how they understood their social and sexual spaces – something that surveys cannot convey due to their very structure.

One challenge I encountered during fieldwork stemmed directly from issues with access to cisgender gay men who were willing to talk about transgender men. Though I had an informant in San Francisco who assisted in disseminating my call for respondents, as well as fliers placed in LGBT spaces such as bars, finding cisgender gay men to participate was harder than I had anticipated. Several of my interviewees, before starting the interview, expressed their hesitation to participate for several reasons. Some

respondents discussed a fear of losing anonymity. Others talked about a fear of expressing negative views that are possibly not widely accepted and seen as politically incorrect. Consequently, these men worried other LGBT people would judge their opinions negatively. Phone or online interviews might have mitigated some of their fears; however, I chose to conduct in-person interviews for the reasons stated above. Therefore, in-person interviews as a method may have impacted which individuals chose to self-select into my study. However, I did try to be mindful of these men's fears by only getting verbal, and not written consent (González-López 2011), which left no paper trail of their identities if they were not "out" about their sexual behaviors and/or identities.

The men who participated in this study had to be, on some level, comfortable and willing to engage in these conversations with me. In fact, some individuals who initially contacted me for an interview decided not to participate because they did not want to talk in-depth about how they viewed transgender men. Therefore, this study captures a picture of a select group of men who were willing and forthcoming enough to disclose what many would deem as quite personal topics and issues. Along these lines, many interviewees asked specific questions regarding my intentions for conducting the project. Though there was some skepticism from my respondents initially, all of the interviewees expressed to me how happy they were to participate in a conversation about transgender men within their communities. Many of these men expressed that they did not have many social spaces and situations (if any at all) to discuss their thoughts openly and freely, regarding transgender men. Part of this feeling of openness from my interviewees may have to do with the fact that I did not disclose before the interviews that I am a

transgender man. However, I did disclose that I identified as a queer man before the interviews.

The nondisclosure about being a transgender man was intentional. Disclosure of my gender identity would possibly influence potential interviewees as well as skew the ways in which respondents answered questions about their thoughts and feelings on interacting socially and/or sexually with transgender men. What surprised me was the fact that none of the men specifically asked me if I was transgender. Only in a few interviews did my gender status become a part of the conversation. During these moments, these men expressed that they had assumed that I was transgender because of the research topic. It was only during these times that I confirmed their assumptions to be honest and transparent. These men stated that “knowing” I am a queer transgender man allowed for them to be more explicit and open about their positive sexual experiences with transgender men.

Non-disclosure of being a transgender man, however, affected me during fieldwork and interviews in ways that I had not anticipated. Some of the interviewees during and after the interview asked questions regarding my thoughts on transgender men, on the “fluidity” of sexuality, and personal issues such as my relationship status, views on marriage, and views on having children.

Despite these challenges, my out identity as a queer man facilitated in establishing rapport with my interviewees. People participating in studies often want to know that the researcher understands them, and gay research participants frequently want to know the researcher’s sexual identity (Klein et al. 2010). I do not know for sure if my interviewees

would have participated if I did not identify as queer or had I not disclosed this information beforehand. However, I felt that identifying my sexuality upfront would help to build comfort and trust with possible interviewees.

## **Thesis Outline**

In the following three chapters, I introduce my findings and argue two important phenomena prevent social, sexual, and political associations and alliances between cisgender gay men and transgender men. First, hegemonic masculinity in the gay male community places enormous pressure on gay men to perform heterosexual ideals to mitigate their subordinate position. Second, LGBT movement discourse throughout its history has emphasized normalization and assimilation; reifying biological arguments for the congruence of sex, gender, and sexuality.

In chapters two through four, I present my findings based on the interviews I conducted with cisgender gay men. For Chapter Two I use the “born this way” discourse to organize my findings into three sections that help explain how gay cisgender men’s understanding of gender, sex, and sexuality opens or prevents inclusion of transgender men into the gay male community. Section one discusses how some cisgender gay men use essentialist discourse to explain maleness/manhood. The next section looks at how some cisgender gay men focused on constructivist discourse to understand maleness/manhood. In the last section, I illuminate why some cisgender gay men struggle between their more liberal personal politics with their actual sexual experiences and attractions to other men.

Chapter Three focuses on Peter Nardi's (1999) conception of the political possibilities within gay male friendships. This chapter is organized into three sections that explain how these men constructed manhood and gayness. The first section dives into how some cisgender gay men reframe their sexual experiences across the gender spectrum across their life history to assist in a gay identity. Next, respondents discuss how affirming gay identity is an interactional process, which at times is not validated by other cisgender gay men. Lastly, I focus on how cisgender gay men who are sexually involved with transgender men question their membership in the gay community.

In Chapter Four, I use Connell's (2005 [1995]) hegemonic masculinity to organize my findings into three sections that explore a possible split emerging within the cisgender gay male community due to transgender men's intermingling socially and sexually with some cisgender gay men: (1) an overarching question about whether or not transgender men are men; (2) how some cisgender gay men expect to "know" that someone is transgender; and (3) how the lack of "knowing" that a man is transgender creates panics regarding gay cisgender men's sexuality and sexual abilities. Lastly, in Chapter Five, I situate this project within the broader literature about gay men, masculinities, and sexualities and discuss directions for future research.

**Table 1: Respondent Demographics**

<b>PSEUDONYM</b>	<b>AGE</b>	<b>RACE</b>	<b>EDUCATION</b>	<b>OCCUPATION</b>
ADAM	57	WHITE	J.D.	ATTORNEY
BRETT	54	WHITE	BACHELOR	FINANCE
CHASE	45	WHITE	MASTER	LIBRARIAN
CONNOR	21	POLISH/CHINESE	SOME COLLEGE	MODEL
DOUGLAS	26	WHITE	MASTER	GRAD STUDENT
FRANK	28	WHITE	BACHELOR	ENTREPRENUER
GEORGE	33	LATINO	MASTER	ADMINISTRATION
HENRY	56	WHITE	MASTER	ARCHIVIST
JOHN	54	WHITE	MASTER	RETIRED
MAX	49	WHITE	BACHELOR	ENTREPRENUER
MICHAEL	58	WHITE	MASTER	HIGHER EDUCATION
OSCAR	23	LATINO	HIGH SCHOOL	SERVICE INDUSTRY
PATRICK	36	IRISH/ITALIAN AND BLACK/PUERTO RICAN	SOME COLLEGE	ENTREPRENUER
REESE	46	WHITE	SOME COLLEGE	CONSULTANT
RICHARD	55	WHITE	MASTER	LIBRARIAN

## **Chapter 2: Gay Men ... Still Men?**

"I think masculine is one of those social constructs like everything else ... it's almost impossible to define ... I want to apologize, but I'm not going to apologize ... A man has a penis, a chest, and maybe some body hair. And I know a lot of men don't have body hair, but for me, that's what I consider," said John, a 54-year-old, white, gay man, when I asked how he defines manhood. John articulated the fragility of gender: it is difficult to explain, comes in various expressions, and some people do not conform to socially constructed ideals. John also illustrated the hegemony of essentialist discourse (the concept that biological determinants dictate sex/gender/sexuality congruently). Though he acknowledged the social construction of masculinity, he understood maleness and masculinity through essentialism. John defined manhood based on biological markers such as "penis, a chest, and maybe some body hair." While he intellectually understands the socially constructed nature of the meanings which define manhood, he explained his perspective through essentialist discourse, a contradiction he feels the need to reconcile – but did not need to apologize.

In this chapter, I examine the discourses cisgender gay men use to make sense of gender, sex, and sexuality, and how these perspectives influence the possibility of integrating transgender men into their community. Additionally, I investigate these cisgender gay men's perspectives on transgender men in their community through mainstream LGBT movement discourse. Mainstream LGBT movement discourse has historically focused on sexuality is an inborn, biological trait. In this way, the mainstream LGBT movement argues that homosexuality is identical to heterosexuality – an innate



predisposition that cannot be changed. The research questions that guide this chapter are:

1) How do gay men understand what it means to be a man? 2) How do gay men's construction of what it means to be a man impact the (possible) inclusion of transgender men in their community?

To answer these questions this chapter is divided into three sections. In the first section, I start by exploring how some cisgender gay men use essentialist discourse to define manhood. These interviewees used biology and the physical body as the measurement and qualifier for being a man. The second section focuses on how other cisgender gay men I spoke with used a constructivist discourse to define manhood. I illuminate how these men viewed manhood as socially constructed and worked to expand their views of manhood beyond biological imperatives. In the last section, I illustrate how the essentialist/constructivist dichotomy is fraught with tension. This section highlights how essentialist and constructivist requirements defining manhood are entangled and difficult to separate.

### **Section 1: Gay Men's Perspectives on The Biological Determinants of Manhood**

"Define a man? (laughs) Umm ... Gosh. Well ... That's a good question," stated George, a 33-year-old Latino, when I asked him how he defined being a man. He continued, "A man would be a male person born with male genitalia. I think that's how I would describe being a man." George indicates biology as the basis for his understanding manhood. Essentialist discourse emphasizes the biological definition of sex and gender. According to this approach, external genitalia, internal genitalia, secondary sex

characteristics, comportment, and manner of dress, all align with either male or female identities. Biological determinants for sex, in this schema, in turn, informs gender, and in this case, manhood. Like George, some informants for this study used essentialist discourse to understand maleness, manhood, and gay identity.

Echoing George's biological perspective, Henry, a 56-year-old white man, stated, "I think of more of the nature side of things. And the cultural, nurturing stuff is just added on." For Henry, like George, biology is the foundation of manhood and the social aspects are "just added on." While there is some impact from socialization for what a man is, the essence is biological. Probing a bit further, I asked him how he would describe what gay means. Henry replied, "A gay person is someone who is attracted to their own sex." Within essentialist discourse, sexuality is also determined based on a person's desire for another's genitalia. If you are assigned male at birth and are attracted to others assigned male at birth, then you are gay.

Henry and George understood themselves as male because they have male genitalia. For these men, their possession of a penis is how they know that they are male. As Henry explains, to be gay is to be "someone who is attracted to their own sex." Within essentialist discourse, there is no room for ambiguity – you are either male or female. Considering the historical focus on biological arguments for the naturalness of homosexuality in the mainstream LGBT movement, the adherence to biological factors for maleness and manhood makes sense. For these cisgender gay men who have fought a lifetime against social norms that labeled homosexuality as unnatural, immoral, and disgusting, biology is a formidable argument against this social stigma.

However, not all the interviewees focused on biology. Some cisgender men explained manhood through constructivist discourse. The use of constructivist discourse, or the idea that gender is socially constructed and historically contextual, is not common in general social discourse. For the cisgender gay men I spoke with, access to this discourse may be an indication of their educational and/or political background. All but one interviewee had at a minimum, some college education (see Table 1). Furthermore, all were, at some point in their lives, socially and politically involved in LGBT issues. It is possible that these men's educational and political backgrounds exposed them to constructivist discourse, which allowed them to view gender as different from assigned sex at birth. This discourse, for some of my interviewees, is what allowed them to integrate transgender men into their social and, most importantly, their sexual lives.

"A man would be defined as masculine in appearance," said Connor, a 21-year-old, multi-racial, gay cisgender man. When I asked him to elaborate on what he meant, he stated, "When I think, when I just hear the word, I think very ... like, ape-man-esque. Broader shoulders, more physically larger, umm ... You know, physically a certain way. So, when we're attracted to men, we're attracted to masculine features." Connor described what a man is by linking the body to masculinity. He illustrates that some interviewees with did not specifically focus on genitalia as the marker of one's gender, but rather on the concept of masculinity to define manhood.

Connor still focuses on appearance, though not necessarily the penis. He looks to the body for affirmation of manhood. His definition does not necessarily discount transgender men (like all men, transgender men come in all shapes and sizes). However,

the fact that being a man involves "broader shoulders" and being "physically larger" still places specific boundaries around who will be seen and accepted as a "man" – regardless of whether this man is cisgender or transgender.

Echoing Connor, Adam, a 57-year-old, white, gay man stated, "I mean I think it's some definition of masculine, a masculine being – more than just a masculine body, but like a presence." While Connor focused specifically on the body's appearance, Adam pushes beyond the body and perceives masculinity to have "a presence." This attention on "presence" takes precedence over specific body parts. However, taking masculinity to be more than just the body also creates a bit of tension. A "presence" is arbitrary and subjectively understood. Though intellectually some of the cisgender gay men were open to the diversity of masculinities, the ways in which "real-life" possibilities of interacting with transgender men's bodies produced anxiety around body configurations and possible shared life narratives. As Adam continued, he related his thoughts on masculinity to transgender men:

I've wondered, like, I know some very attractive transgender guys, and when I've felt some attraction to them, I've wondered: Can I be attracted to somebody who didn't grow up being a man? Is it the fact that they're a man now, is it the fact that they have a penis, or is it the fact that they grew up male with sort of my set of experiences? I haven't really figured it out. I think ... but I think that probably having grown up male would be really important to me and having a penis is really important to me, in addition to the sort of masculine being.

Taking the definition of man as masculine a step further than Connor, Adam explains that being masculine is more than just the physical presentation of the body. Even though Adam defined being a man as having or being a masculine presence (a constructivist approach) and "more than just a masculine body" he ends up discussing his ability as a gay man to be attracted to transgender men based on a biological marker (an essentialist perspective) – the appearance of a penis. He also includes the social element of being raised as a boy, but this is still based on essentialist discourse. He equates having been assigned male at birth to have a corresponding overarching narrative of boyhood, which he assumes people assigned male at birth all experience.

Though Adam does state he has not “really figured it out,” the fact that he ends with “I think that probably having grown up male” and “having a penis is really important” shows the difficulty of including transgender men into cisgender gay men’s sexual repertoires. Adam’s view of transgender men also points to how cisgender gay men exclude transgender men – an othering process. Because essentialism (or biological markers) dictates congruence between sex, gender, and sexuality, cisgender gay men seek out others who have the same external genitalia. This internalization of biological discourse, for some cisgender gay men, inherently works to exclude transgender men due to being assigned female at birth. Additionally, it is also possible that the mainstream LGBT movement’s investment in such biological arguments for social and political rights in the United States has had an impact on these men’s ability to integrate transgender men within their communities.

All the men in this study, I argue, have been impacted by discourses which inform

their sense of self as cisgender gay men throughout their life course. First, there is the overarching narrative of biology as the dictator of sex, gender, and sexuality. Second, these men were raised as boys and have lived through the requirements of heteronormativity and hegemonic masculinity. Lastly, as men who are politically and socially involved with the LGBT movement and communities, they have been inculcated with a similar discourse that justifies their sexuality through biological precedence. Therefore, the fact that some of the cisgender gay men, regardless of their exposure socially and politically to transgender issues, have difficulty integrating transgender men into their lives and communities is not all that surprising.

Other informants, however, looked beyond biological explanations for manhood. In the next section, I discuss how these cisgender gay men utilize social constructivist discourse in their views of manhood. The social construction of gender establishes gender and sex as separate categories. Gender is historically and geographically variant; a performance of supposed one's sex (West and Zimmerman 1987). Sex is the biological determinants of male and female. The informants who use constructivist discourse, I argue, push against the historical trend of the LGBT movement to legitimate non-heterosexuality as "normal" and "natural." These men create a counter-discourse that may not only help integrate transgender men within gay communities – it could have a positive impact on integrating transgender people within movement itself.

## **Section 2: What is Man?: Beyond Essentialism**

"A man? ... Anyone who identifies as a man, really," stated Patrick, a 36-year-old,

when asked about his perspective of what a man is. He then added, "Yeah, I think it's that simple. Anyone who identifies as a man. I mean, if that's the lifestyle and ... if that's who you are, that's who you are." Patrick's statement exemplifies how some of the cisgender gay men I spoke with focused on constructivist discourse on gender and sex. Patrick's statement that being a man is a "lifestyle" points to the social-cultural aspects of gender rather than biological determinants.

Echoing Patrick, Oscar, a 23-year-old Latino, stated, "I would define a man ... as somebody who claims to be a man." When I pressed him about how his definition of manhood related to how he would define being gay, Oscar continued, "I would define gay ... as ... I hope this is helpful, but as somebody who claims to be gay. And usually that has to deal with, and also you can apply this to the question before, but it has to do with the understanding of the word and the social constructs that it is integrated into." Like Patrick, Oscar explains his views through the discourse of social construction. However, he also shows that discourses available to him to answer how he defines manhood are limited and constraining. Therefore, Oscar explains that "it has to do with the understanding of the word." While he understands manhood to be socially constructed, he also acknowledges that not everyone views maleness in the same manner.

Patrick's and Oscar's perspectives on manhood differ from the overarching narrative of mainstream LGBT movement discourse. By going beyond a biologically-based argument for gender identity and community membership, these cisgender gay men provide an opening that contemporary "born this way" discourse does not; an avenue that welcomes transgender men as valid members of gay male social, sexual, and political

networks. Taking this step toward understanding gender, sex, and sexuality as social constructions, while difficult to linguistically explain, allowed these men to expand the definitions dictated by essentialism and the LGBT movement's investment in biological arguments for normalizing homosexuality.

Similar to Patrick, Frank, a 28-year-old graduate student, stated, "I always feel more comfortable and would rather that someone tell me what they want to identify with and how they want to be ..." He then continued, "Not just pronouns but how they want to be seen and so for me if they themselves want to be seen or heard of as a man, that's like enough for me ..." Frank not only worked to keep sex and gender as separate concepts, he also actively attempted to push his perspective by not assigning or assuming another person's gender to be more inclusive of masculinity beyond hegemonic ideals. This push away from assuming another's sex and gender and allowing others to indicate their identity goes beyond constructivist ideas and into the realm of queer discourse. Queer discourse asserts that the binary of male/female and masculine/feminine are not only restrictive. Rather, the idea that gender can be "known" upon visual inspection is suspect; the performance of gender (West and Zimmerman 1987) does not necessarily match how a person identifies.

When asked to further explain what he meant, Frank said, "I don't believe like oh you've only been on T [testosterone] for so long, that doesn't count, or you know, being on T versus not being on T and like that doesn't matter and like having a dick doesn't matter, so like all of that. I'd just rather someone; I'd rather my definition of what a man be continues to expand by everyone that I meet with that feels comfortable identifying



with that." Like Patrick and Frank, some of the cisgender gay men I spoke with understood sex as a biological category and gender as a social category.

By removing qualifications such as being on testosterone for transgender men, Frank is also redefining the norms for the physical aspects of a man by removing secondary sex characteristics as necessary parts of gendered expression. Frank focused more on the social and psychological aspects of manhood and actively worked to include different body configurations into his social and sexual repertoire – he worked to change the definition of maleness and manhood. This changing of the definition of maleness and manhood into the social and psychological aspects has significant implications. Frank's willingness to learn how to interact with another person based on being told how they identify (the social aspects) removes the ways in which our current social interactions stem from the presumption of gendered expressions. Adding in how a person views themselves (the psychological) into the social world and within social interactions also removes the requirements and trappings of gendered expressions as congruent reflections of one's sex assigned at birth.

This section illustrates that some cisgender gay men do not follow the overarching mainstream LGBT movement discourse which focuses on the biological determinants of sex, gender, and sexuality. Within this group of men, there were some who not only viewed gender as historically contingent and socially constructed – these men worked to disrupt the ways in which gendered expressions and gender performance were automatically assumed and rather, changed their social interactions to allow people to announce their gender. However, regardless of these men's investment in maleness and

masculinity as socially constructed or biologically rooted, identity is ultimately recognized and understood in a social process – a process that includes being recognized by others who may or may not have the educational and/or political background of the men in this study. Furthermore, as the next section illustrates, separating sex, gender, and sexuality into purely one camp or the other is difficult to maintain in practice.

### **Section 3. "A Big Can of Worms": Gay Men's Reflexivity and Challenges to Understanding Manhood**

"It can go so many ways, and you know ... sometimes you've never been asked that question or think ... It's like, yeah, I was born a man, so I feel like a man, you know? And I identify as I man, but when you try to define it it's ... It's a big can of worms because there's so many ways to define it (laughs)," stated George, a 33-year-old Latino. Like George, several interviewees were bewildered by the question regarding how they would define manhood. These men had trouble explaining the concept. Some respondents commented that the most difficult question to answer during our entire conversation was having to define manhood.

Thus far we have seen how many of the men in this study differed in how they defined what a man is, yet they were also reflexive enough to know that their definition is not necessarily how everyone defines a man. However, the "big can of worms" is that regardless of how these men understand themselves as gendered beings, which mostly stems from a direct link between sex and gender, these men comprehend themselves to be men because they have a penis. Furthermore, these men see themselves as gay because

they are attracted to male identified people who have penises. The transgender men in their personal and extended social and sexual networks make it difficult for these men to reconcile this intertwined nature between sex and gender.

"It depends when you ask me this. I suppose I would have answered it differently ten years ago as more of a superficial thing. Now I define it as someone who is male. Someone who identifies as male. Someone who's born male," stated Henry when I asked him to describe what a man is. He continued after a sigh:

I actually think there are ... I think it's a set of traits and feelings and approaches to the world. I don't think there's a stark divide between male and female, masculine and feminine but I think there is, there is differences. And I think, like, I think a lot of my gay friends, I consider them women. I think they are more feminine than masculine.

As he tries to explain how he defines what a man is, Henry seems to go through all the possible explanations available: someone assigned male; someone who identifies as male; a specific approach to the world. This listing of different ways of understanding manhood highlights the complexity of attempting to unlink sex and gender as separate concepts. Like Henry, many interviewees attempted discursively to go beyond a biological understanding of sex, gender, and sexuality. However, the intertwined nature of sex, gender, and sexuality also creates the inability to reinforce differences between men and women. Henry exemplifies the intertwined nature of sex, gender, and sexuality because he sees some of his gay friends more as women since, to him, they exhibit behaviors socially constructed as feminine in the United States.

"Like, you know, ideally if I'm with you, and I really like you as a person, I wish it were just like, I could fall in love with you and marry you, and I wouldn't care about physical characteristics but ... I'm human. Maybe that's a copout. I do have preferences even though I wish I didn't," said John, a 54-year-old, white, man, when I asked him to clarify what he meant regarding the rigidity of his sexual desires. As interviewees discussed how they understand what a man is, some expressed the desire to be more sexually flexible and less focused on specific body configurations.

John illustrates that, for some of these cisgender gay men, there is an acknowledgment that one's sexual habitus (Schilt and Windsor 2014) limits sexual and romantic possibilities. Schilt and Windsor's (2014) concept of sexual habitus focuses on "the interplay between gendered embodiment, erotic desires, and history of sexual practices" (p 733). Erotic habitus (Green 2008), or the socialization of sexual proclivity, shapes sexual habitus development through the decisions made regarding the types of sexual activities to engage in and with which partners to explore those activities.

These limitations partially come from the ways in which certain body parts and physical features are vested in as desirable, or as Connell (2005[1995]) would describe as cathexis. With a lifetime investment in his sexuality as a cisgender gay man, John can disregard how his preferences for certain bodies and genitalia are shaped by discourses that prioritize a biologically-rooted sex, gender, and sexuality system. Stating he wished he could disregard his preferences for certain physical characteristics illustrates the hegemony of the essentialist binary system, as well as the process of cathexis. John has spent his life socially, emotionally, and sexually in a gay identity within a society and

mainstream LGBT movement that reifies the biological determinants of sex, gender, and sexuality. It is not hard to understand, therefore, why it is difficult for him to disregard physical characteristics.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter examined the ways in which cisgender gay men's use of essentialist or constructivist discourse on sex, gender, and sexuality impacted their views on manhood and gay identity. In this study, the cisgender gay men I spoke with wrestled with three major themes. First, they showed how essentialist discourse restricted their perspectives on proper male bodies. Additionally, these men highlight how constructivist discourse pushed them to examine their classification of people. Lastly, these respondents discussed how being reflexive with the categories of sex, gender, and sexuality created tensions between their understanding of manhood, their sexual repertoires, and including transgender men within their communities.

The first section highlights how the impact of both hegemonic masculinity and the "born this way" discourse shaped these cisgender gay men's views on maleness, manhood, as well as gayness. As an oppressed group contending with a cultural history that painted homosexuality as sinful and disgusting, utilizing LGBT movement discourse allowed these men to (somewhat) normalize and assimilate homosexuality as a natural biological trait equal to heterosexuality. In this section, these men illustrate that normalization through such discourse has limitations: transgender men are not a part of this conceptualization of inborn sexuality.

The second section of this chapter shows that some cisgender gay men understand sex, gender, and sexuality as socially constructed attributes. These interviewees not only attempted to expand their views of maleness and manhood to include transgender men, some even went as far as to leave all gendered assumptions aside. In doing so, these cisgender gay men created a space that allowed for the nullification of specifically gendered expression and physical attributes for membership criteria.

In the last section, my interviewees revealed how a lifelong experience taught these men that maleness and manhood derived from their sex assigned at birth. Correspondingly, their sexuality is based on their sexual attraction to the genitalia of people assigned male at birth. For some of these men their lifelong investment in their maleness and masculinity contradicted their intellectual understanding of sex, gender, and sexuality as socially constructed. Additionally, I argue, these men's exposure to LGBT movement discourse over a portion of their lives shaped and reified a biologically-based argument for the naturalness of homosexuality. So, then, considering the restrictive criteria that biologically based arguments place on maleness, manhood, and gayness, do cisgender gay men's sexual life course affirm that they are "born this way"? Furthermore, how do cisgender gay men who have sex with transgender men manage their sexual identity and community membership under the hegemony of "born this way" discourse? I now turn to answering these questions.

### **Chapter 3: To Be or Not to Be Gay**

“They either instantly wanted to fetishize it or they instantly wanted to be like oh, it's not a real man, or that's so gross I can't believe you did that,” stated Frank, a 28-year-old, white, graduate student, as he reflected on his conversations with other cisgender gay men about his sexual encounters with transgender men.” He continued, “Like, you know, there was kind of like an othering experience for me and them like trying to like chip away at my gay card. Which was helpful for me because it was like, ‘Oh, well maybe I don't want the gay card if that's the way we're going to be policing each other.’” Frank and other interviewees confirm previous research that shows gay men explore and grow important parts of their lives through creating social networks with other gay men with similar personal histories (Reece and Dodge 2004). As illustrated by Frank, this process may include gay men establishing unspoken rules to police one another regarding gender, sex, and sexuality politics.

In this chapter, I explore how cisgender gay male identity is shaped and reshaped by a life-long process of sexual and social experiences within their gay communities and how these experiences are influenced by the presence and current understandings of transgender men in their communities. Following Hennen's (2008) call for further examination of cisgender gay men's relationships with transgender people, I examine the narratives and discourses these cisgender gay men use to understand and make sense of their gender, sex, and sexuality. More specifically, I consider how cisgender gay men view transgender men who identify as gay or queer. Therefore, the research questions that guide this chapter are: 1) How do cisgender gay men understand their sexual self and

their identity formation as adult gay men? 2) How do these processes further shape these gay men's views of transgender men in their LGBT communities?

To answer these questions, I start by examining the tensions and contradictions between a sexual history that is mixed with heterosexual and homosexual experiences and the maintenance of an adult gay male identity. This first section illustrates that these cisgender gay men have a complex sexual life course and how they use larger societal narratives and discourses to construct a gay identity, even when their sexual histories (past and present) include heterosexual experiences. The second section focuses on how identification with the gay community and gay identity is contested ground. Here, I show how cisgender gay men who view transgender men as a part of their community contest the mainstream gay community's perceptions of what represent acceptable bodies, and even question their willingness to be identified with such a community. For the last section, I illuminate the ways in which these cisgender gay men understood the possibilities for transgender men's inclusion within the gay community. This section elucidates how many of these men hope for more transgender inclusion in the future, but are, skeptical overall.

### **Section 1: Gay ... but not always?**

"I experimented a lot with ... my neighbor's kids and then I also experimented a lot with older teenagers. Most of them were male ... and that kind of solidified me being a homosexual because I did have these ... my body had, you know, reactions that I didn't get when I was being sexual with a girl. Whereas like being sexual with a guy, like my



body knew this is what I wanted,” stated George, a 33-year-old Latino with a master’s degree, as he recalled his sexualized experiences when he was about 12 years old. For George, his sexual experiences with both boys and girls during childhood helped to solidify his understanding of himself as a gay man. He identifies his identity as homosexual because of his selective bodily responses to girls’ vis-à-vis boys’ bodies. His experiences with both boys and girls facilitated his own understandings of sexual attraction and sexual responses, and ultimately his identity as a cisgender gay man.

Surprisingly, interviewees who had heterosexual relationships in the past (as adolescent and adult men) were very candid about these experiences. Having spent much of their life accepting their sexuality and constructing an identity entrenched with the gay community, acknowledging sexual experiences with women could, from other people’s perspective, possibly discount their gay identity. Additionally, the influence of the mainstream LGBT movement’s historical position that sexuality is inborn, admitting to sexual encounters with women (and especially enjoying such encounters) delegitimizes how gay identity is constructed and understood in the United States. Yet, even with the acknowledgement of sexual attraction and/or sexual experiences with women, these men did not identify as heterosexual – or even bisexual. Instead, these men reframed their previous heterosexual sexual experiences into a narrative that helped to explain their current homosexual identification. In doing so, these men work to delegitimize their sexual encounters with women and simultaneously attempt to reposition themselves as gay.

“I dated women ... in early high school, late junior high and I dated both [men and women], probably for the rest of high school and then decided after high school that men was more my cup of tea,” said Patrick, a multi-racial 36-year-old, entrepreneur, when I asked him about the history of his sexual experiences. He continued, “And it wasn't so much the sexual ... but the connection I had, that I could make with men [...] relationship wise for me. So, yeah, it was more of a connection than a sexual preference.” For men like Patrick it was not about the actual mechanics of sex and arousal, but rather the ability to connect emotionally with another person of the same sex. For example, as Patrick discussed his first sexual experience with a boy, he said:

My first boyfriend [was in high school] ... He was living in a group home at the time and there were no rules about boys and boys. So, that was no problem. So, we ended up having our first sexual experience in the backyard of his group home. I had a few aha moments because my sexual experiences before that was very ... elementary. It was just oral sex and things like that. And I was like, Oh!

Patrick's sexual experiences included both men and women. However, his orientation towards men and his eventual decision to exclusively date men was not necessarily facilitated by the mechanics of sex, sexual stimulation, or sexual attraction. Rather, his focus on men as his objects of desire came about because of an emotional component, a special form of intimacy and connection that did not transpire with women.

Echoing Patrick, Max, a 49-year-old, white, business owner, stated, “The first time I had intercourse with a female she was 17 and I was 14, which is weird because at

the time that's a big age difference. So, I continued like pretty early on with like actually doing the deed, it started to lose interest for me.” He then continued, “I would have these feelings and, you know, was really excited to have sex with females but then when it started happening ... it just, the actual physicality of it, just wasn't doing it for me ...” Like Patrick, Max also dated and had sex with both men and women in high school, but eventually his interests in sex with women disappeared as his body did not respond favorably. When I asked him to explain further, Max said, “you know, the girls just weren't doing it in the end and the boys really started giving me butterflies in my stomach.” While Max points out that he did not have favorable responses to the sexual experiences with women, he also highlights that his responses to men included more than just physical responses from his penis. He continued with an example, “There was another girl I took home and we got really fucked up and it felt good but ... I was banging her but there was no emotional connection there.” Like Patrick, Max’s sexual experiences with women lacked an emotional connection that he felt when he was with men.

“I was aware that I was turning 40 and although I didn't feel great desire to be with women, I felt as though I simply needed to have that experience. There was a kind of bucket list quality to it,” stated Michael, a 58-year-old educator. For Michael, having sex with women was a part of trying to experience something that he felt was important before he died, an experience with a relevant existential dimension. He continued, “My first encounter with a woman was at an orgy and I was shocked at how much I enjoyed it. I was shocked enough that, the day after, and for several days, I was walking around in a bit of a daze wondering if I was a closet bisexual.”

When I asked him to clarify what he felt after his first sexual encounter with a woman, Michael explained, “It was like, oh my god, you know ... I'm jumping off into the great unknown here. And part of the daze was ... not just being able to say I've had sex with a woman, which at that point was a big deal to me, but also to say I really, really liked it.” To his surprise, Michael enjoyed his first sexual experience with a woman, which was within an environment that is thought to be less conventional and more sexually open: an orgy. It is important to note that the setting of an orgy is a very sexually-specific arena in which the rules (both implicit and explicit) of sexual behavior differ vastly than more normative sexual experiences which occur in private settings and usually less people (and possible sexual spectators) involved.

As I probed further about the setting of the orgy and his need for other sexual encounters with women, Michael explained:

[My confusion] clarified itself, in terms of my sexual orientation and whatnot. It clarified itself with subsequent encounters with women. I had a total of three. The second one was also in a group sex environment. And the third encounter was a threesome. I realized that part of the ... pleasure of the first time was the fact that it was an orgy and that I actually was ... you know, stimulated by the presence of a lot of men. So, it was just omni-pansexual energy that contributed a lot to the pleasure of the experience. And that's when it was really clear to me. Because I realized that ...you know ... if he wasn't there ... I would not ... be enjoying this half as much.

Because Michael had a positive experience the first time he had sex with a woman at the age of forty, especially after many years as an out gay man, he felt the need to verify the fact that he had felt sexual pleasure during sexual exchanges with her. His ability to find sexual pleasure with a woman went counter to his understanding of sex, gender, and sexuality. Michael thought his erotic abilities had lied within a limited repertoire; gay equaled sexual attraction to and desire for people assigned male at birth. Therefore, his foray into heterosexual sex had unintended consequences. Michael's need to double and triple check his experience of pleasure with a woman was directly linked to the fact that he needed to figure out if he was "a closeted bisexual"—a direct questioning of his own sexual identity.

Michael's confusion and worry about being bisexual show how biological discourses require congruent and narrow definitions of sexual desire, sexual behavior, and sexual identity. In other words, the influence of an innate, biologically-rooted perspective of sexuality shaped Michael's pleasurable sexual encounters with women problematic and wholly incongruent with his gay identity. Both the essentialist/biological perspective and the mainstream LGBT movement's reification of the innateness of homosexuality, Michael's experiences of sexual please with women went against his understanding of sexual orientation.

In accordance with Laumann et al.'s (1994) findings in *The Social Organization of Sexuality*, this section illustrates that sexual desire, sexual behavior, and sexual identity are not always congruent with each other. Sexual desire is how a person thinks about their sex life; their erotic wants and fantasies. Sexual behaviors are sexual practices a

person engages in such as: oral sex, anal sex, vaginal sex, masturbation, etc. The cisgender gay men confirm Laumann et al. (1994)'s findings that many people, regardless of gender or sexual orientation, have engaged in sexual activities or have sexual desires that contradict their sexual identity.

“It's kind of odd to feel like I'm going to write off 50 percent of the world and say that I'm never going to be attracted to them and I think I'm at a more confident place in my life where I feel like I could explore sexuality with women at a lower risk factor, that it's particularly not high risk and see where it went, and I'm single so I can have sex with different people,” states Adam, a 57-year-old, white, cisgender gay man. For Adam, his current status as a financially secure, older, single, white, cisgender, man allows him to explore his sexuality beyond other cisgender gay men with less social costs. Social costs that some cisgender gay men, especially if they are young, homeless, and/or financially unstable, and rely on the support of the cisgender gay community, cannot ignore.

Though the interviewees all identified as a part of the queer community-at-large, many interviewees, like Adam, did not feel the need to be overly rigid about the possibility of engaging in sexualized encounters with people of a variety of sex and genders. For some of the interviewees, even though they've spent a large part of their life as gay men and have emotionally investing in such an identity, there was some room for expanding their repertoire of sexual expression. Many interviewees who had spent time re-evaluating their sexual orientation and objects of desire spoke of wishing to being less restrictive and more open to sexual experiences beyond cisgender men. For example, being selectively involved with cisgender women, transgender men, and beyond.

“I’m homosexual but there are some times that I do find women and trans women, trans men attractive,” declared George, a 33-year-old Latino. When I asked him to clarify what that means to him, he continued:

So, I’m predominantly homosexual but there are some exceptions. (laughs)

I mean, I’ve always been attracted to the opposite sex but sometimes it just doesn’t work down there. I do see people that are not my sex, I do see them as attractive, and there are times that I would potentially be sexually into them, but other than that, I guess just physical attraction.

Further illustrating how gay identified men may become more fluid about their actual experiences of sexual attraction and sexual desire (rather than being rigidly bound to being exclusively male-male), George shows a homosexual identity can simultaneously be maintained with desires and behaviors (both physical and sexual) which are more fluid and can include people across the gender spectrum. George and other cisgender gay men like him in this study illustrate that a person’s sexual identity is not maintained solely through their attraction and potential sexual involvement with other people assigned male at birth. In other words, there is more to sexual identity maintenance than one’s sexual desires and sexual behaviors.

Additionally, some interviewees explained that their views on sexuality as a rigid, innate identity were changing. “I have come to see sexuality as more fluid, which means I’m seeing it in men in general,” stated John, a 54-year-old, white, man. He then continued, “Meaning, what we call straight men, and that’s changed a lot over the years because ... you know, a lot of this is cultural and there’s still, obviously, a definition of

straight men versus non-straight men, but it is shifting.” As someone who is a 54-year-old cisgender gay man, John has seen many cultural changes in the United States regarding sex, gender, and sexuality. John highlights how the definitions of what it means to be a straight or gay man is historically contingent and over time these definitions have not only changed in the past, but are currently changing in the United States. In *Straights: Heterosexuality in Post-Closeted Culture*, James J. Dean, while acknowledging that the United States still operates under heteronormative standards, argues the central change in contemporary society is a system which no longer requires heterosexuality for participation in government and has decriminalized and de-pathologized homosexuality (p. 248). These major socio-cultural changes, Dean (2014) argues, have shaped heterosexual men and women’s sexual identity displays as “more deliberate and conscious” (p. 13).

In contrast to the more complex and diverse past sexual history of most participants, a small portion of interviewees never wanted nor experienced any sexual contact with women. When asked about having sexual experiences with women, Henry, a 56-year-old, white, man explained: “No and I really regret that. I wish it wasn't true. I'm a Kinsey 6. I'm totally at the other end.” Recalling the Kinsey scale invokes a very specific time and moment in U.S. history. The Kinsey scale and Alfred Kinsey’s work on sexuality had major social implications for scholars studying different dimensions of human sexuality, and mainstream society in general. For instance, Kinsey and his research team offered people in the United States a language to make sense of their sexuality, for example, as a gradation between heterosexual and homosexual — with a lot



of people somewhere in-between. According to Kinsey (1948), 0 is exclusively heterosexual, 1 is predominantly heterosexual ... etc. and 6 is exclusively homosexual. By stating that he is a “Kinsey 6,” Henry utilizes Kinsey inspired discourse to illustrate that he is “100%” homosexual. Paradoxically, Henry also stated that he “regrets” never having a sexual experience with a woman.

But what does he regret? Even though he regrets not being more sexually fluid, he explains this phenomenon in his life through a discourse that conceptualizes men’s sexuality as more rigid than women’s sexuality. For example, Henry explained:

I think women are inherently bisexual. There's just much more of a looseness about them. They're more attracted to the person than the surface, than the genitals and all that. And I admire that so much. I think women are so much better than men. But I don't really ... know if men, I think ... I hear this all the time and I don't know, maybe you're bisexual ... I have not really met a true bisexual man. I've met a lot of men who slept with women before they came out and then said I just did it. And they liked it, but it wasn't ... really what they really, really wanted.

Thus, even though these men may have participated in what is socially understood to be heterosexual sex, these experiences do not impact a person’s “real” or “true” gay identity precisely because it was not totally pleasurable. Furthermore, because of Henry’s understanding of men’s sexuality being more rigid than women, a man’s sexual relations with women prior to coming out as gay has to be reconciled as something that is not integral to the shaping of a gay sexual orientation. As mentioned in Chapter 2, many of

the cisgender gay men who had sexual experiences with women described both a lack of physical response from their bodies and the inability to feel an emotional connection. Similar to Lillian B. Rubin's (1984) study on intimacy and sex between heterosexual men and women, the cisgender gay men I interviewed highlight both the difficulties with upending their gender socialization and the importance of intercourse for intimacy and connection with another person. Therefore, it is not surprising that some of these cisgender gay men, like the heterosexual men in Rubin's (1984) study, pursue penile penetration as a part of their sexual exploration, development, and sexual journeys.

For Henry, to be a "real" gay man is to experience sex with other men — regardless of having any experiences that include people who were not assigned male at birth. However, there is another mechanism here that Henry identifies: physical pleasure with a special emotional connection. Therefore, to be a "real" gay man is to not only experiencing sex with other men, but also to find pleasure in those sexualized exchanges with other men. By constructing "real" sex as being tied to pleasure, Henry can redirect other gay men's sexual experiences with women prior to coming out as innocuous experiences that are irrelevant to the identity of being a gay man.

In this section, these cisgender gay men illustrate that the creation of a gay identity is manifested in more than just a sexual history that is exclusively male-male and is, in reality, complicated and multi-faceted. My informants illustrated that sexual identity, sexual desire, and sexual behaviors are not always congruent and can change over the life course (Laumann et al. 1994). In fact, many of these men had had multiple sexual experiences with women, across different parts of their life histories, and they

were, indeed, physically pleasurable experiences. Even with such experiences, most of the cisgender gay men in this study reframed their past as an avenue that helped them to arrive at their gay identity. These men confirm Jane Ward's (2015) argument that men's sexuality multi-faceted; that sexual identity is beyond the sex acts. People invest in the cultural meanings involved in a sexual identity and when some behaviors do not align with that identity, the acts are reframed in ways that secure that identity. It is not impossible to understand why these cisgender gay men reframed their complex sexual experiences given the large impact that the "born this way" discourse has impacted the assimilation and normalization of gays and lesbians in the United States. Many of these men were born and raised during a time when being gay was both seen as a mental illness and unlawful behavior. The ability to use "born this way" discourse helps to combat the stigmas attached to being labeled a sexual minority.

As these men's sexual experiences shaped their past and current identities as cisgender gay men, some of my interviewees also discussed how sexual experiences with transgender men helped them to question their gay identity. Nevertheless, while there were a few gay men in this study who had never engaged sexually with women, most of the interviewees had had some sexual experiences with women prior to coming out as gay men and even afterward. Yet, none of these men see their past sexual experiences with women as an indication of being heterosexual or bisexual. Therefore, it is possible that one pathway for cisgender gay men to a gay identity and lifestyle may include heterosexual encounters.

## **Section 2: Losing the “Gay Card”**

“I was dating trans men but I had not yet met my partner. I said to my [friend] and his long term partner that I was dating trans men. I had hoped I conveyed something of my ... my joy in doing so and he sort of scrunched up his nose and said something I would classify as transphobic,” said Michael, a white 58 year old educator, when I asked him about his sexual experiences with transgender men. He continued, “And my heart sort of sank. Like, I thought more of you ...”

Michael’s divulging of his sexual experiences with transgender men to a cisgender gay male friend and the subsequent negative response given illustrates how some kind of a “cisgender-exclusive” gay community membership is solidified through interaction and by sharing with others about their experiences of sexual intimacy. In other words, through interaction and by sharing with others their experiences of sexual intimacy, gay men create the boundaries of acceptable sexual behaviors, and ultimately, what sexual experiences “count” for gay community membership. Furthermore, this interaction is not just about being verified as a member of the gay community by another cisgender gay man but is simultaneously a process of questioning self-membership within said community. Negative reactions from other cisgender gay men may make an individual, such as Michael, question whether they want to continue to be associated with this social group. In other words, identity and identifying with a community (in this case, being gay) is contingent upon both being assessed by others, as well as individually evaluating the desire to be accepted by other group members.

For the interviewees that viewed transgender men as a part of the gay male community and thus as potential sexual partners, the lack of acceptance from other cisgender gay men created tensions around how they identify with the gay community-at-large and with labeling their own sexual orientation as gay. For those who have expanded their definitions and understandings of sex and sexuality to include transgender men, negative reactions from other cisgender gay men about transgender men created a tension between identifying with the gay male community and being openly attracted to transgender men. The two are not, as Michael illustrates, mutually inclusive. As such, these men questioned whether they want to be associated with the community that they ostensibly belong to.

For men like Michael, their allegiance to any given gay male community crumbles in the face of their different conceptualizations of sex and sexuality. Fracturing between members and the contestation of the boundaries of membership within a group also has political implications. In other words, the boundaries of an identity create divisions that impact socialization and political association. If, as Nardi (1999) argues, gay men's friendships are a force within which political action and social change can occur, the split between the cisgender gay men who view transgender men as a part of their community, and those who do not, illuminates a possible point of obstruction for creating cohesion between these two groups of men. Furthermore, this chasm can also be a tension point for the future of the mainstream LGBT movement. However, there are some signs that the future for building relationships and community between cisgender gay men and transgender men can be positive in the long term.

### Section 3: Beyond Binaries and “Better” Gay Men

“I have no problems with that. I have a hard time understanding why people would,” states Henry, a white 56-year-old gay man, when I asked him his thoughts about cisgender gay men who have sex with transgender men. Henry illustrates that, regardless of how these gay men viewed the possibilities of sexual or romantic interactions with transgender men for themselves, many were nonjudgmental of *other* gay men having sex with transgender men. Like Henry, these men did not consider sex with transgender men as unusual or odd. The issue for these men was not transgender men, but rather, the people who would view a cisgender gay man having sex with a transgender man as somehow wrong. However, Henry and many of the men who did not have a problem with other cisgender gay men having sex with transgender men, had not had sexual nor romantic relationships with transgender men.

“Umm ... Nothing wrong with that. (laughs) You know, it's perfectly natural. Nothing wrong with anybody who has sex with any gender or person. Whatever makes you happy. You know, whatever suits your desires. There's nothing wrong with it. There's nothing wrong with love. Who's to say you can't make love to ... to anybody?” said Patrick, a 36-year-old, multiracial, entrepreneur. Like Henry, Patrick also does not have an issue with anyone having sex with a transgender man. By using the language of love – an experience that all people can identify with – he also uses discourse that the mainstream LGBT movement and some sectors of mainstream society have used to promote images of gays and lesbians as “normal” human beings, especially about their

rights for marriage equality in the United States. At the same time, his last statement that “who’s to say you can’t make love you anybody” takes the mainstream LGBT movement’s discourse on love and pushes it beyond the hegemonic discourse of a binary sex/gender/sexuality system. The view that there should be no judgment against anyone who would decide to be sexual with a transgender man is interesting here, especially considering the previous section which highlighted how the larger discourse on sexual identity by many of these cisgender gay men focused more on biological views on gender and sex.

“I don’t think gay men really understand it. You know, I think they’re still very ... San Francisco is so odd, but I think they’re still very close-minded,” explained Connor, a 21-year-old Polish and Chinese fashion model, when asked about how cisgender gay men in his social networks viewed sex with transgender men. He continued, “When I was at a restaurant [having a meal with] other gay men, and you know, the situation came up where we talked about sexual experiences and I was like, yeah, trans men. And they were just like, Oh no, never, never. You know, ‘cause it’s always about body parts. They’re like, well there’s not ...” Even though he lived in a city that many consider to be extremely liberal and accepting of LGBT people, Connor did not connect with these other cisgender gay men because of their differences in how they conceptualized sex, gender, and sexuality. The cisgender gay men at the table with Connor held views that coincide with the born this way discourse, while Connor conceptualized sex and gender as separate concepts. This tension created a conversation that, for Connor, felt very unwelcoming. Several interviewees echoed Connor’s view: some interactions among

cisgender gay men regarding sexual encounters with transgender men came across as transphobic or fetishistic.

For the interviewees that viewed transgender men as a part of the gay male community and thus viable sexual partners, the lack of acceptance from other gay cisgender men regarding sexual inclusion of transgender men – as illustrated by Connor – created tensions around how they identify with the community-at-large and with labeling their own sexual orientation. Negative reactions from other gay cisgender men about transgender men create a tension between identifying with the gay male community at large and being men who are openly attracted to transgender men. As such, these gay cisgender men question whether they want to be associated with the gay community.

Some, like Michael, a 58-year-old, white, post-secondary educator, had mostly positive reactions from within their gay social networks. “With the exception of the person in New York, really I ... there was never anything negative.” He further explained, “And that's what made me realize I have some really high quality friends here [in San Francisco]. You know, aren't exhibiting anything I feared they might because I simply didn't know if I would encounter transphobia among my friends – and I did not. I might have encountered some ignorance, but not anything phobic.” Michael explained the ‘ignorance’ he encountered pertained to questions such as the difference between sex and gender and wondering if his partner was going to transition or had already transitioned. As discussed in the previous section, Michael had one negative encounter with his friend in New York when they discussed his attraction to transgender men. For these cisgender gay men, living in liberal San Francisco did not alleviate the fear of



rejection from their social circles. Thus, like Connor or Michael, having sexual attraction and experiences, and even further – becoming involved in a relationship – with transmen is, in many ways, fraught territory for these cisgender gay men who may end up losing support structures and relationships that they may have spent a lifetime building.

“At least for me, like, any of my friends that actually have been with a trans man, absolutely gain a credibility with me. Like it produces a respect response,” said Max, a 49-year-old white entrepreneur, when I asked him what he thought about cisgender gay men who have sex with transgender men. He continued, “I’m thinking of one in particular when he told me. I was so surprised. I never thought he would be, like, able to do that. Check out that limit and go there because, I mean, this one in particular, like is one of those that was like gynophobic and he’s telling me about positive experiences, you know. I was just like, wow. Like talk about like being open to the possibility of change. So, yes, people have gained mad respect in my eyes when they do that.”

When discussing gay cisgender men who have sex with transgender men, some of the interviewees, like Max, expressed that these men gained credibility, especially if these men were thought to be gynophobic. To be gynophobic is to fear or hate (or both) women, which includes the fear of sexual intercourse with women. For Max, cisgender gay men who were known to disdain female genitalia in the past but more recently had sexual encounters with transgender men transcended a boundary he perceived was impermeable. The idea that such a cisgender gay man could “check out that limit” challenges the preconception that sexual identity, sexual desire, and sexual attraction are biologically inborn characteristics. However, the person also must “go there.” In other

words, it is not enough to question how one would react to a possible sexual encounter — you must have some sexual contact. In other words, cisgender gay men who get involved sexually and romantically with transgender men inspire respect from men like Max because they are taking a social and a political risk, they are, in a way, engaging in a revolutionary act. By letting go of the trappings set by essentialist discourse in society and from the mainstream LGBT movement, cisgender gay men who engage in sexual and romantic relations with transgender men risk and forgo the communal and political establishment. This not only places these men outside the possibilities of social and political access, they also simultaneously question the boundaries of the mainstream LGBT culture and movement.

When asked about the possibilities of the future of the communal relationship among gay cisgender men and transgender men the responses from my interviewees were mixed. Some men were not optimistic about the possibility of gay cisgender men being political allies to transgender men. Connor said to me, “So, I think gay men need to do more on their part to protect trans people. ‘Cause it's just like ... I feel like the only people who really are protecting trans people are themselves and some straight people who try to be supportive.” I asked Connor to explain further and he continued, “I feel gay men still aren't ... it's still kind of like for themselves kind of thing. You know, when they hear about these, you know, a trans person getting killed, you know, murdered, it's just ... they kind of overlook it.”

Probing further, I asked Connor to elaborate why he thought cisgender gay men did not participate more in transgender issues and political causes. He stated,

'Cause they don't really consider them a part of the community. And I think there's ... because of that societal distance, gay men don't think of it as a gay problem. And I think gay men have that issue — if it's not a direct gay problem, it's not their problem. It's a trans problem. So the trans people need to take care of it. However, you know, gay men outnumber trans men and trans women ... They need all one community to help each other out. So I think that both sides need to help each other out and really learn from each other at the same time.

Connor highlights that community and social movement membership boundaries are contested terrain: they can be re-drawn to incorporate more people or to keep people out. Echoing Connor, Michael said:

I would like to believe that the connections that I'm starting to see via places Gear Up and the open trans friendly policies of various organizations that are majority cis gay and queer men that that's all just ... that there's just going to be a slow seepage of interconnectedness and that anything trans exclusionary will not be tolerated. You know, that it will be shamed and exposed, as would, I'd like to think, racism. Although that's not always the case. I mean, it's naive of me to say I guess.

Though Michael discusses that in San Francisco there are gay communities that are actively working to include transgender men, he also indicates that he has some reservations. After a sigh, he said, "I'm just going to go with optimism and say that I do believe the walls will continue to come down. And I would love to be in a world where

there is a greater mix. I know a number of friends who are in trans/cis relationships but I realize we're not common. I feel like ... the burden if you will, the enlightenment, these are kind of questionable words perhaps, needs to happen among cis men. Who are probably gay. And actually an examination of what does gay mean to you.”

Michael wanted to be optimistic about the future between transgender men and cisgender gay men, but he also recognized that the changes would need to come from cisgender gay men. And that is, for Michael, the crux of the matter. The ability to assess the relationship a person has between their gender, sex, and sexuality is an avenue that has the potential for opening up and “enlighten.” Though he acknowledges the problematic language such as “enlightenment,” this reveals much about how he views other cisgender gay men. For Max and Michael, they see these examples of interactions between cisgender gay men and transgender men as positive changes within the gay male community. Michael and other informants, moreover, shared their awareness of both the tensions, as well as the progress, taking place within communities that selectively embrace cisgender gay men and transgender men. These cisgender gay men perceive cisgender gay men as responsible for critically evaluating themselves, identifying their privileges with regard to gender, sex, and sexuality, and eventually “enlightening” themselves and others dealing with similar issues and concerns within their communities. In addition to being “enlightened,” a cisgender gay man may also develop a sense of respect toward cisgender gay men who establish sexual and/or romantic relationships with transgender men.

Overall, however, there seemed to be a consensus among informants that the gay male community did not provide much space for transgender people nor was there a focus to integrate transgender issues. Douglas, a 26 year-old white educator, anticipated a potential fracture within a complex, diverse, and marginalized community. He stated, “Yeah we're going to see the T splinter off from the LGB and I think that's actually going to be really good because I think that transgender people are going to find much stronger allies in the straight community. [...] I mean the gay community has bonded to the trans community mostly through being marginalized and needing to band together with someone.” He further described the dynamics he has witnessed as an insider, political processes that have paradoxically promoted inequality within these marginalized social groups: “The gay community, the gay male community, has been willing to make space for trans people as long as that space is one of trans people furthering gay causes. It has not been a space [to] further trans causes or saying that trans people belong in that community.”

However, Douglas also believes that “trans people breaking away” has the potential to address the complex and diverse issues that exist *within* these groups. He explained, “I think it's great to acknowledge a different set of issues, I think it's great to say that trans experiences are not the same as gay and lesbian experiences.” Nevertheless, what is missing from Douglas’s statement is an acknowledgement there are transgender people who also identify as gay, lesbian, bi, or queer (Grant et al. 2011). Discursively, this signals how the mainstream LGBT movement has socially constructed a movement that continues to uphold biological boundaries. In other words, the mainstream LGBT

movement's continued investment of presenting same-sex sexuality as an inborn, biological characteristic makes it difficult to envision the enmeshed complexity of gender, sex, and sexuality. Another consequence of focusing on sexuality as an inborn characteristic, is that the mainstream LGBT movement's perpetuation of being "born this way" dismisses the socially constructed nature of sexuality (Seidman 2003). Moreover, though there are some changes in the ways cisgender gay men, as individuals, work to integrate transgender men into their personal lives and as a part of their community, the men I interviewed did not see more long-term cohesion and community-building. Instead, they believed that transgender people, as a group, would break away from mainstream LGBT activism.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter examined the ways in which cisgender gay men's identity development and their non-linear sexual history impacts the inclusion or exclusion of transgender men as a part of the gay community. In this study, the cisgender gay men grappled with three main themes in regard to their sexual identity. First, these men worked through biological understandings of gender, sex, and sexuality in the face of non-linear sexual experiences. Second, these men experienced how their sexual identity is maintained and verified through an interactional process which at times does not validate their own perceptions of themselves as gay men. And lastly, some interviewees faced whether to continue to identify with being "gay" in the face of being unable to meet

the rigid, essentialist definitions due to finding themselves attracted to, as well as having positive sexual experiences with, transgender men.

The men in this study illustrate that sexual identity, sexual desire, and sexual behavior are not always congruent. Due to the conceptual separation of sex, gender, and sexuality, the gay cisgender men who participated in this project worked around their various sexual experiences with people across the gender and sex spectrum. In other words, these men reframed their sexual experiences with people assigned female at birth as a mechanism that assisted in facilitating their gay identities. This chapter shows that when essentialism dictates how people understand their gender, sex, and sexuality, it becomes clear that these categories are not understood nor emotionally invested in as separate concepts. They are not only intertwined, but actually inform and reify each other.

In addition, the gay cisgender men who did include transgender men as a part of the gay male community (and therefore, as possible sexual partners) were confronted by a lack of acceptance from other gay cisgender men because of their differing sexual repertoire faced a conundrum: whether they would continue to identify as gay. The lack of acceptance from other gay cisgender men regarding transgender men as viable social and sexual participants in gay male culture and community prompted these interviewees to question if identifying as “gay” was right for them. As this chapter demonstrated, those who re-invented their identity and worked to consciously expand how they define what a man is ended up also re-evaluating their allegiance with the cisgender gay community. For most of these men, the decision to abandon defining themselves only as gay came at

the heels of feeling as if their identity as gay could no longer hold because of the ways in which other gay cisgender men policed the definition of what a man is. In other words, the lack of social support from other gay cisgender men for the expansion of these men's sexual repertoires made them question whether they want to identify as gay.

While most of the men in this study were attempting to be more inclusive of transgender men in their community, a contradiction plagues these men. In theory, most of these men did not view sex with transgender men as an issue, however, many of them had not actually engaged in sexual activity with transgender men. In addition, these men did not express much optimism about a future in which the gay community-at-large would accept transgender men. Furthermore, gay identity is formed and validated through an interactional process that draws on binary and essentialist discourse – one that continues to be propagated by the mainstream LGBT movement and is reinforced through interpersonal interactions, which continues to hinder the possibilities of transgender men's inclusion.

With more attention and understanding of a split between gay identified people and transgender people within the larger mainstream LGBT movement, these men signal is a growing split within the gay male community. So, then, how do cisgender gay men understand transgender men? More specifically, do cisgender gay men see transgender men as men? Do cisgender gay men recognize transgender men are in their community spaces? Furthermore, do cisgender gay men accept transgender men in their community spaces? I now turn to exploring these questions in the next chapter.



#### **Chapter 4: Will the Real Gay Men Please Stand Up?**

"Oh lord. [Laughs] Hmm ... you know, I've often been fooled by trans men," stated Brett, a 54-year old white man. Brett gave me this response after I asked him if he had ever found himself attracted to transgender men. He stated that he experienced sexual attraction to transgender men without "knowing" they were transgender. For Brett, being "fooled by trans men" not only shows that transgender men are invisible in gay spaces, but also this statement highlights the fact that transgender men are not seen to be "real" men. To be "fooled" implies that what is expected (e.g., a penis) is not reality, and therefore, transgender men are not men.

In this chapter, I explore issues of the body in cisgender gay men's perspectives on transgender men within their community. I utilize R.W. Connell's (2005 [1995]) concept of hegemonic masculinity; where under hegemonic masculinity, there is a hierarchy of subordinated gay masculinities (Hennen 2008). Gay men who desire to be muscular, masculine, and "straight-acting" attempt to adhere to hegemonic displays of masculinity to mitigate their subordinate position (Phua and Kaufman 2003; Phua 2007). This desire relegates large bodies, older bodies, non-white bodies, and feminine bodies to lower realms within this gay masculine hierarchy (Taywaditep 2002; Phua 2007; Slevin and Linneman 2010; Robinson 2015). Schilt (2010) argues that in the workplace transgender men are often cast as "just one of the guys" in a way that perpetuates patriarchy. However, the cisgender gay men I interviewed illustrate that in social situations, especially when there is potential for sex, transgender men fail to live up to the ideals of hegemonic masculinity because of their assigned sex of female at birth. I will

show that hegemonic masculinity also relegates non-cisgender bodies to the bottom of the hierarchy, and the effects of this marginalization prevent the ability for social and political associations between cisgender gay men and transgender men

Then I examine the influence of LGBT movement discourse, which emphasizes biological determinants for homosexuality, on how cisgender gay men make sense of transgender men's bodies, and how the body is used as a measurement for (a lack of) acceptance. Therefore, the research questions that guide this chapter are: 1) How do cisgender gay men view transgender men's gender and sex? And 2) How does transgender men's (in)visibility within the gay male community effect cisgender gay men's views about transgender men?

To answer these questions, I first examine respondents' discourses regarding the sex and gender of transgender men. In this section, I highlight how the influence of the LGBT movement's discourse works to discredit transgender men's gender and sexuality. Next, I focus on the issues of transgender men's visibility within the gay male community. I illustrate how the inability of many cisgender gay men to "know" that transgender men are in their social and sexual spaces limits possibilities for social, sexual, and political connections. In the last section, I show how a lack of awareness about transgender men within gay male social and sexual spaces creates an anxiety about interacting with transgender men. I document how some of the interviewees experienced a vagina panic — a fear of not knowing how to interact with genitalia that, for many cisgender gay men, is the antithesis of being "gay."

## **Section 1: Are Transgender Men Really Men?**

"One thing that I've heard a lot of gay men say ... Excuse me because this is tremendously offensive ... 'Why are all the butch dykes turning into trans men?'" stated Douglas, a white, 26-year-old graduate student. When I asked him to elaborate, Douglas explained, "Umm, so that means that there's a sense still that trans men are not gay men, they're butch lesbians who are just going uber butch." Douglas highlights that some cisgender gay men see transgender men as not just "butch lesbians," or masculine-identified lesbians, but lesbians "going uber butch"—placing transgender men as the "most" butch lesbians. Regardless of what a transgender man looked like (e.g. having a beard), according to this construction of sex, gender, and sexuality, gay men saw them as extremely masculine women who were emotionally and sexually attracted to women.

A recurring theme in these cisgender gay men's perspective on transgender men was a conversation about whether or not transgender men are men at all. Some of my interviewees, like Douglas, expressed their disdain for the ways in which the cisgender gay male community did not accept transgender men — which is, in sociology, a process of "othering." "Othering" is the process that marks a particular group of people as different, where this difference is based on seeing this group as morally inferior to one's group (Schwalbe et al. 2000; Lister 2004). The group considered to be morally inferior is constructed as an object – the "other" – marked by their "undesirable" trait, which denies the complexity and capabilities of this person's full self (Krumer-Nevo and Benjamin 2010). In this case, Douglas' statement about gay men's views of transgender men as "butch dykes" exemplifies the process of othering.

To be labeled as "butch dykes" disregards how transgender men identify (as men) and simultaneously emphasizes the sex these men were assigned at birth (as female). In other words, the cisgender gay men Douglas mentioned hold an essentialist perspective (i.e. based on biological markers) of sex, gender, and sexuality which allows them to dismiss the self-identification of transgender men as men and relegate them to a different category — not men. However, this downgrading is complicated. As mentioned above, "going uber butch" is not just a placement of transgender men as lesbians; this distinction by cisgender gay men between butch and uber butch creates a hierarchy or gradation of masculinity within the lesbian community.

Douglas indicates that the current landscape of the gay cisgender male community possibly does not allow transgender men to be “gay,” and therefore accepted as such, specifically because biological factors take precedence. In other words, because of the hegemonic discourse of essentialism, transgender men are relegated to the status associated with their sex assigned at birth and, therefore, being women. Additionally, this discourse is phallogentric: a penis is what makes a “real” man. Under this discourse, transgender men are not “real” men. Therefore, they cannot be gay men. When being gay is understood as a sexual orientation based on the desire for genitalia that is the same as one's own, transgender bodies becomes unintelligible.

However, transgender bodies, like cisgender bodies, have variation. Not every person who identifies as transgender goes through hormone therapy. For transgender men who do go through hormone therapy, however, the impact of testosterone affects both secondary sex characteristics (e.g. facial hair) and their external sex organs. Some

transgender people do not go through any surgical procedures. Some do. Likewise, some transgender men have hysterectomies which remove their internal sex organs, and some go through "bottom surgery" (e.g. metoidioplasty or phalloplasty) on their external sex organs. These medical interventions change the shape and size of their external sex organs, and these medical interventions help to align transgender men's bodies with their male identity. While some cisgender gay men view transgender men to "still" be women because of their sex assigned at birth — and assume their sexual organs are those of a person assigned female at birth — these assumptions rely on essentialist discourse and not on the actual bodies of transgender men.

Douglas clarified further, "A lot of the gay male community see trans men as part of the lesbian community and trans women certainly as part of the gay male community within certain limited contexts, but that's it. And ... I don't see yet the conversations happening that allow that to change." Douglas's statement illuminates how deeply ingrained essentialist discourse shapes how many cisgender gay men understand sex, gender, and sexuality. The perception that "a lot of" cisgender gay men view transgender men to be a part of the lesbian community and transgender women as a part of the gay male community is part and parcel of an essentialist perspective. The biological perspective conceptualizes sex assigned at birth to be the way of knowing a person's sex, gender, and sexuality. Douglas's statement that "conversations happening that allow that to change" do not exist within the gay male community also points out how essentialist discourse is the dominant framework that cisgender gay men use to make sense of the social world. This discourse prevents expanding the categories of sex, gender, and

sexuality to be more inclusive of transgender people and transgender bodies.

In addition, Douglas shows how the body is used as a measurement and qualifier for inclusion or exclusion. In doing so, the use of the body as for membership exemplifies the reliance on essentialist discourse within the gay male community helps to delineate group membership. If the core premise of being gay is to be assigned male at birth and to be emotionally and sexually attracted to others labeled male at birth, then transgender bodies do not qualify. Even if a transgender man has had hormone therapy and some surgical interventions such as a phalloplasty according to essentialist discourse, the precedent of biology — the sex assigned at birth — trumps all. Furthermore, the hegemony of essentialism prevents cisgender gay men from having a perspective that transgender men's bodies have variation and do not look like cisgender women's bodies. Similar to Han's (2007) study of how racism affects desirability for the gay community, the cisgender men I interviewed indicated that another axis of judgement of gay bodies includes a hierarchy that places cisgender bodies as more desirable than transgender bodies.

Max, a 49-year-old white entrepreneur, proclaimed, "I've always been enamored of like boyish daggers, umm, not the older dyke, but what became my definition of daggers came from late 80s, early 90s and they're basically dinosaurs. I don't think I know one dagger left. They're all boys now." He continued to say, "So I feel like it's gotten like this ... uh, well, I'm butch then that means I'm a trans man. It's like it's completely negated, in some ways, the experience of just being a butch woman." Here Max echoes Douglas's statement about how gay cisgender men view transgender men as

lesbians. As a cisgender gay man who has been out and a part of the LGBT community since the 1980s, Max linked his views on transgender men with what he perceives to be a change in the lesbian community.

For Max, like other older cisgender gay men who have been a part of the LGBT community for several decades, the increase in visibility of transgender men is equated with a loss of butch lesbian women within the larger LGBT community. This can be seen as part of the operation of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 2005 [1995]). Previous research has shown that gay men push against various forms of larger social oppression, which can take place through the physical body (Phua 2007; Slevin and Linneman 2010). Some gay men work to appear more heterosexual in order to mitigate some oppression (Phua and Kaufman 2003; Phua 2007). However, creating gay physicality based on heterosexual norms subordinates large bodies, older bodies, non-white bodies, and feminine bodies (Taywaditep 2002; Phua 2007; Slevin and Linneman 2010). I argue that transgender bodies need to be included within this subordinated hierarchy of gay masculinities. In "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," Rubin (1984) argues that certain acts are deemed appropriate or right (e.g. heterosexual sex) placing them within the charmed circle. Simultaneously, other acts are considered inappropriate and bad (e.g. sadomasochists) pushing these to the outer limits. The good/bad sex dichotomy creates a hierarchy amongst sexuality. Rather than focusing on larger social mores around sex and sexuality as Rubin does, the concept of a sex hierarchy can be used for the gay male community.

When asked what the barriers to cisgender gay male acceptance of transgender

men within their community, respondents illustrate how hegemonic masculinity's inherently constricting and hierarchical nature inhibits inclusion. The difficulty of including transgender men socially and politically within the gay male community stemmed internalization of being raised under patriarchy, hegemonic masculinity, and biologically-grounded LGBT movement discourses.

"So, I do feel like misogyny does play a role in it. 'Cause, you know, I feel gay men will view trans men as not men," stated Connor, a 21-year-old, when I asked him about his thoughts on how gay cisgender men view transgender men. He then continued, "Because, you know, not ... just because, you know, body parts." Like Connor, some of the men I spoke with discussed how they perceived the larger cisgender gay male community to have underlying issues that stem from misogyny. According to Allan G. Johnson (2000) "misogyny is a cultural attitude of hatred for females because they are female." Furthermore, misogyny is "a central part of sexist prejudice and ideology and, as such, is an important basis for the oppression of females in male-dominated societies. Misogyny is manifested in many ways, from jokes to pornography to violence to the self-contempt women may be taught to feel toward their own bodies." As people who were assigned male at birth and were raised within a patriarchal society, the cisgender gay men in this study might see and treat people assigned female at birth as lower than themselves. Therefore, for some cisgender gay men, transgender men are understood within an essentialist framework — which the ideals of hegemonic masculinity operate within — and places transgender men on a lower end of the gay male social hierarchy.

Echoing Connor, Michael, a 58-year-old educator, told me, "I do wonder if



misogyny and sexism within the gay male communities contributes to a continued separation, or a lack of connection, or contributes to ... not making more connections, maybe, where a cis-trans relationship is, you know, relationships are more common." He continued, "It's sort of like ... I want to say to a lot of gay men, get your heads out of your butts and look around. You might surprise yourself." Michael wondered if the ways in which misogyny and sexism, which are dominant ways to enact hegemonic masculinity, impacts the "lack of connection" between cisgender and transgender men. Both Connor and Michael's discussion of sexism and misogyny exemplify Jane Ward's (1999) concept of "queer sexism." Ward argues that even though gay men experience oppression for their sexuality, this oppression does not exclude them from having sexist or misogynistic perspectives.

Ward's (1999) argument, as well as Connor and Michael's candor about sexism and misogyny in the gay male community, connect with hegemonic masculinity. Cisgender gay men are still men and even though they do not meet the standards of hegemonic masculinity, they still derive benefits from the system that places a higher status of men over women; maleness over femaleness. While cisgender gay men may experience some form of oppression in their daily lives, as men they benefit from a society that still places a premium on being male.

The othering of transgender men through the use of sexism and misogyny facilitates strict boundaries between cisgender gay men and transgender men based on biological criteria (e.g. a penis). Furthermore, a hierarchy is created and based on these biological criteria: being cisgender is more valued than being transgender. Lastly, the

othering of transgender men upholds the narrative of LGBT movement discourse that justifies sexual orientation as a natural, biological characteristic. In essence, hegemonic masculinity (which included sexism and misogyny), along with the influence of the LGBT movement's discourse that argues for normalization based on biological criteria, makes it difficult for some cisgender gay men to view transgender men as a part of the gay male community.

## **Section 2: Transgender Men's (In)Visibility in Gay Spaces**

"I don't - I don't know what I'm paying attention to, but I feel like I'm ... the trans person is invisible to me, you know, in a lot of the gay bar spaces or I'm not—I'm not sure if I'm seeing them or not," stated Chase, a 45-year-old when asked about what he thought of transgender men in gay male social spaces. Chase illustrates what complicates the situation for cisgender gay men when in social and sexual situations: the fact that many (but not all) transgender men are not noticeable as such. This is in part due to how gender, sex, and sexuality are a part of a social performance (West and Zimmerman 1987). For West and Zimmerman (1987), we "do gender" meaning that people perform the social activities that are associated with being feminine or masculine. In other words, people wear specific clothing, talk, walk, and display in a variety of ways that they are male or female through socially and culturally accepted forms of masculinity or femininity. When cisgender gay men are in social spaces where transgender men are performing "proper" gay masculinity, it becomes difficult to distinguish between cisgender and transgender men.

Like Chase, Michael also discussed the lack of visibility of transgender men. "My memory of meeting trans men, I mean, very specific memories would have to start with [my job as an educator], which is shocking because, I mean, I've been there for 20 years and I must have met trans men before then but just don't have any specifics. Although, that being said, it is my impression that there are really ... that the number of trans men my age who've transitioned, you know, a long time ago, is very, very small. I do not know a trans man my age. I don't think I've ever met a trans man my age." As someone who is in his 60s, Michael here also points out the perception that, as a group, transgender men are relatively "younger." Even though he's been out as a gay man and as a part of the LGBT community for 40 years, he indicates that his exposure to transgender men has only been within the last 20 years.

Some of the invisibility that transgender men face in gay male social and sexual spaces may stem from the ubiquity of LGBT movement discourse. The discourse's substantial investment in biological determinants to normalize homosexuality over the years has become reified for LGBT people and the LGBT movement in the U.S. overall. This reification masks the ways in which gender is a performance (West and Zimmerman 1987) and facilitates in creating an assumption that, when a cisgender gay man finds another man sexually attractive, the sex and gender of the person is in agreement with biological determinants assigned at birth. Having internalized that they are "born this way," some of the interviewees not only do not "see" transgender men in their communities, but simultaneously makes the inclusion of transgender men complicated.

However, it is also possible that there is a shift happening within the cisgender

gay male community. Later in our conversation, Max discussed how he noticed that the younger cisgender gay men amongst his social circle, and people on social media on the Internet (such as Facebook), were more open to including transgender men as viable sexual partners and as a part of the gay male community. He stated,

Once upon a time they might have been like 'eww pussy, that's disgusting,' umm, like now consider sex with trans men. Umm ... More and more. But most of them, with one exception, are younger. They seem to be more malleable. Uh, I know much more people in their 20s, and I also see online more people in their 20s. Uh, usually it's either a non-issue or experimentation. I would say one of those. And surprisingly the majority of it is non-issue. I can't say that it would be a bigger part of ... I would say it's a bigger part of their sexual repertoire now. I can't say that it would be their primary relationship. But it's not like dozens even. Now what I see online, what I see online in San Francisco is certainly in the dozens. That I'm seeing online regularly, and they're open with it. And I'm seeing a lot more trans men online.

Max explains that within his social networks transgender men's acceptance within gay male communities occurs with cisgender gay men in their 20s and some of the connections are facilitated via the Internet. Robinson (2015) examined gay men's usage of Internet websites for social and sexual experiences which highlighted that gay men self-selected whom to engage with on the website Adam4adam.com. This study revealed that gay male Internet spaces paradoxically create a hierarchy of gay masculinity based on race and HIV status as well as provide the ability for gay men to find community and

friendship. Similarly, Max illustrates how the Internet can also be a space where cisgender gay men can discuss their sexual attractions to transgender men with other like-minded cisgender gay men.

### **Section 3: Vagina Panics and Being "Fooled"**

"I was just like ... he felt and presented himself like a man ... I reacted to that and when I found out that he was trans, at first I was like, oh, well, I don't know if I will be able to have sex with this person," said George, a 33-year-old Latino, when about meeting transgender men in social and sexual spaces. He continued, "Like, I don't know how ... what's going to happen like if I was going to have sex with this person? Like how that was going to happen or if I was going to freak out because the person wasn't born with male genitalia. So, it was very, it was very eye opening for sure. (laughs)"

In a similar vein, Patrick also talked about his inability to "know" that he was sexually attracted to a transgender man. He stated, "Umm ... It's not a bad experience. I ... How would I explain the experience? I was just kind of like, huh, why didn't I figure that out. (laughs)" Akin to the idea that Brett has been "fooled by trans men," Patrick asserted that he should have figured out that the person he was attracted to was transgender. While Patrick did not view such revelations as deceptive, some of the men I interviewed discussed that they know cisgender gay men who had negative reactions to finding out their object of desire was transgender. For example, Michael, a 58-year-old, told me, "Umm ... in a bar, this is a while ago ... the reaction was, you know, anger ... and this person saying he had been fooled. He was fooled."

When cisgender gay men do experience desire for transgender men in gay spaces, sex, gender, and sexuality as separate concepts falls apart. As many of these men understand their sexual orientation to be tied directly to their genitalia (discussed in Chapter 2), attempting to integrate transgender men into their sexual repertoire requires dismantling the very ways in which they have come to construct their identity as cisgender gay men.

Cisgender gay men may experience what I call a "vagina panic" when confronted with sexual desire for transgender men. This process stems precisely from the ways in which they, as cisgender gay men, have spent their lives emotionally investing in an identity that explicitly identifies the penis as the body part that is the source of their erotic desires (Connell ). Transgender men do not have the same type of genitalia that cisgender men have, therefore, being attracted to transgender men creates a panic regarding sexual possibilities for cisgender gay men. The impasse for these men is between their current object of desire and their sexual habitus (Green 2008). Having spent a period of their life investing in the idea that to be gay means to be sexually restricted to a particular organ of the body (e.g. the penis), the ability to incorporate transgender men into their sexual repertoire proved difficult, especially if how one understands sex and sexuality is through biological essentialism.

Furthermore, explaining how sexual involvement with transgender men is still a gay sexual experience is difficult given the binary parameters of essentialism and LGBT movement discourse. For example, when asked about his conversations with other cisgender gay men regarding transgender men, Connor stated:

San Francisco is so odd but I think they're still very close-minded. 'Cause, when I was at a restaurant, there was a lot of other gay men, and you know, the situation came up where we talked about sexual experiences and I was like, yeah, trans men. And they were just like, Oh no, never, never. You know, 'cause it's always about body parts. They're like, well there's not ... And I'm like, well, it is, but it isn't. You know, 'cause it's not about body parts, it's about ... it's about the ... energy. And you know, I'm like, it was such a ... I can't explain it, but it was such a masculine energy and a feeling ... it really doesn't ... you know. But it's hard to understand until you really try it.

Connor's attempt at explaining his sexual attraction to transgender men to the other cisgender gay men, and even to himself, is somewhat muddled. "Energy and a feeling" is not an easy concept or phenomenon to explain nor convey. He explains that to understand how and why transgender men are men is through engaging in sexual activity. The cisgender gay men Connor spoke with focused on the lack of a penis as the reason for not including transgender men into their sexual repertoire which fall in line with essentialist and LGBT movement discourse.

In order to mitigate some of the uncertainty with mixing in social and sexual spaces that can include a variety of body configurations, some interviewees discussed a preference for separating the social and sexual; to create boundaries of where certain bodies can intermingle and alleviate the possibility of encountering genitalia that is considered undesirable. For example, Max, a 49-year-old, white, entrepreneur, stated:

So, I guess what I'm getting at is that I believe that there are spaces and times for everything and uh, I'm alright with there being a women's festival. So, like, there is ... I'm sorry, but there's not a white and black answer for me there so ... in SM (Somasochism) circles I've never had a problem with it. When it comes to like actual like penetration like those that are male identified, I've never had an issue with that, I've never had an issue with trans men in male spaces even if I may not necessarily be attracted to the ones that are there but I'm also not attracted to all the males that are there.

For some of the interviewees, like Max, the problem was not that transgender men participated in gay male social spaces. Like Schilt and Westbrook's (2009) study of coworkers of transgender men, some of the cisgender gay men I spoke with preferred to have their social and sexual spaces separate from transgender men. Interestingly, Max mentions that he is fine "with there being a women's festival." Referencing how separate social spaces are demarcated for women to congregate without the presence of men invokes the controversies that have surrounded the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival for more than 20 years until its closing in 2015. For more than two decades the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival's explicit policies to only allow entry to women assigned female at birth had created a major rift with transgender people, especially transgender women (Gamson 1997).

Max continued, "I don't know ... it's kind of like women ... this is an analogy, it's not the same thing, but like women in gay bars. I don't have a problem with a woman in a



gay bar; I have a problem with a woman in the back room." Even though Max speaks of a particular separation between social and sexual spaces, he also illuminated the fact that these spaces are not always separate. SM spaces can and are both social and sexual. In fact, they are explicitly spaces that bring together people who are interested in SM practices and subculture. Part of the issue here, for Max, is what Goffman (1959) conceptualized as the tension that occurs between front stage and back stage behavior. In essence, people perform roles that are unique to the context within which they find themselves. The front stage is where people perform for others, whereas the backstage is where the performer gets reprieve from an audience. However, in the case of SM spaces, the front and back stages collide into one.

Within a social and sexual space such as a bar, having a delineated area where people perform sexual acts in the back room makes possible encounters between cisgender gay men and transgender men fraught with a tension expressly based on expectations of body configurations that should be occupying such spaces. While Schilt and Westbrook (2009) argue that "gender normals" experience a penis panic, especially for heterosexual cisgender men's sexual contact with transgender women, I argue that cisgender gay men experience a vagina panic when there is possible contact with transgender men. The vagina panic that some cisgender gay men experience when confronted with desire for transgender men stems directly from the fact that transgender men are, for the most part, invisible in gay social and sexual spaces. The fact that transgender men are invisible creates much discomfort for these cisgender gay men who feel as though they should be able to detect transgender men in their midst.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I examined how essentialist discourse and the LGBT movement's counterpart discourse of "born this way," along with hegemonic masculinity impact the ways in which cisgender gay men view transgender men as a part of their community. Here, the interviewees with struggled with three issues. First, the ways in which essentialist discourse influences how these men understand transgender men's bodies. Second, how the (in)visibility of transgender men within gay male spaces present challenges to these men's essentialist understanding of sex, gender, and sexuality. And lastly, how transgender men's invisibility in gay social and sexual spaces create distress for gay cisgender men when confronted with desire for transgender men.

Several men who participated in this study discussed how essentialist discourse and the ideals of hegemonic masculinity prevent cisgender gay men from viewing transgender men as men and instead see them as a part of the lesbian community. In effect, essentialist discourse and the ideals of hegemonic masculinity assist cisgender gay men to relegate transgender men as a less than desirable part of their community, and as the least viable partners for sex and relationships. Furthermore, there was some discussion about how sexism and misogyny could negatively impact the ability of cisgender gay men to make connections with transgender men. Therefore, this chapter shows how transgender men's sex assigned at birth and the physical body are a measurement utilized by cisgender gay men to discriminate membership and desirability. In effect, this hinders the possibility for social and sexual, and therefore political,

relationships with cisgender gay men.

Also, some cisgender gay men deliberated about their inability to "see" transgender men in their social world. Here the men I spoke with revealed how essentialist discourse and hegemonic masculinity work in tandem to erase transgender men's bodies in public spaces. The requirement that all people must "do gender," which is rooted in essentialism and hegemonic masculinity, works in two ways simultaneously. Doing gender makes it difficult for cisgender gay men to "see" transgender men because of the assumptions linked with essentialism about proper gender presentation and performance (e.g. assigned male at birth equals having male genitalia and performing masculinity in dress, comportment, and affect). Doing gender also requires transgender men perform the ideals of hegemonic masculinity to be addressed as men in society.

Lastly, there was conversation regarding the ways in which transgender men's invisibility, or rather, some cisgender gay men's assumption that they show "know" that a man is transgender, created unease when in social and, especially, sexual spaces. Interviewees disclosed the ways in which essentialism and hegemonic masculinity work to create a vagina panic for cisgender gay men when confronted with the possibility of desire for transgender men in social and sexual spaces. These men illustrated how the internalization of an essentialist perspective that created a hierarchy based on the demonization of femininity (and people assigned female at birth) as well as a barrier to the acceptance of transgender men as men. Essentialism creates an assumption that transgender men's bodies are women's bodies. For some cisgender gay men then, to experience desire for transgender men creates discomfort around the possibility of

coming into contact with genitalia associated with people assigned female at birth. Essentialist discourse and hegemonic masculinity, then, work together to prevent social and sexual connections between cisgender gay men and transgender men. In doing so, these barriers also prevent individual relationships as well as political contacts. In the last chapter, I summarize the contributions of this project, consider the limitations of this work, and address new directions for future research.

## **Chapter 5: Conclusion**

This research study began with two general research questions: (1) Do cisgender gay men view transgender men as friends and as potential sexual partners? (2) How do gay men manage their identity as gay men when they have been with transgender men in romantic relationships or sexual encounters? The findings of this study provided rich understandings of how self-identified cisgender gay men understand themselves as gay men and how their perspectives of manhood, and especially, gay manhood, affected the ways in which they included or excluded transgender men from their communities.

In the first analytical chapter, I uncovered that the cisgender gay men who participated in this project struggled to define manhood. The cisgender gay men in this study illustrate that gender, sex, and sexuality are not understood nor emotionally invested in as separate concepts (Connell 2005[1995]). They are not only all intertwined but inform and reify each other. The men I interviewed demonstrated how hegemonic masculinity and “born this way” discourse confines who can be considered a gay man; transgender men are not a part of this conceptualization of inborn sexuality.

Some interviewees invested in biological perspectives of sex, gender, and sexuality. For these men, there were two mechanisms that contributed to the exclusion of transgender men. First, with the internalization of biological discourse, these men perceived maleness and manhood through sex assignment at birth. And consequently, sexuality was understood in such manner that focused specifically on sexual body parts. Other cisgender gay men used constructivist discourse to understand sex, gender, and sexuality. These men attempted to expand their views of maleness and manhood to

include transgender men. Rather than place a gender on another based on stereotypical gender expressions of masculinity or femininity, some of the men I interviewed preferred others to announce their gender. Thus, these men worked to create social spaces that would expand the characteristics for membership.

Chapter Three explored how cisgender gay men understood their sexual identity and how these processes shape the possibility of inclusion or exclusion of transgender men in their communities. This chapter focused on the political possibilities within gay male friendships (Nardi 1999). The men illustrate that sexual identity, sexual desire, and sexual behavior are not always congruent (Laumann et al. 1994; Ward 2015). These men reframed their past sexual experiences with people assigned female at birth as a mechanism that assisted in facilitating their gay identities.

Some of these men felt that transgender men should be visibly transgender. In other words, they expected to “know” by looking at another man whether he is transgender. Because many transgender men do not physically look differently from cisgender men, in particular for transgender men who medically transition (e.g. take hormones and have surgeries), interviewees were confused by their inability to “know” that transgender men are in their social and sexual networks. The essentialist basis for sex and gender in society, as well as how these concepts inform knowing one’s sexual orientation, illustrates that the acceptance and integration of transgender people cannot solely rely on educating people about separating sex and gender as separate concepts.

Furthermore, the gay cisgender men who did include transgender men as a part of the gay male community (and therefore, as possible sexual partners) were confronted by a

lack of acceptance from other gay cisgender men because of their differing sexual repertoire faced a conundrum: whether they would continue to identify as gay. Those who re-invented their identity and worked to consciously expand how they define what a man is ended up also re-evaluating their allegiance with the cisgender gay community.

In Chapter Four, the men I interviewed exposed a major pressure point for the inclusion of transgender men within gay male communities: many cisgender gay men do not view transgender men as men – they are regarded to be very masculine lesbians. Essentialist discourse and the ideals of hegemonic masculinity contribute to cisgender gay men's relegation of transgender men as a less than desirable part of their community, and as the least viable partners for sex and relationships. Therefore, birth sex and physical body configurations are a measurement used by cisgender gay men to maintain boundaries of proper membership. In effect, sex assignment at birth and body morphology prevents social and sexual, and therefore political, relationships between cisgender gay men and transgender men.

Additionally, the invisibility of transgender men within gay male spaces presented challenges to biological understandings of sex, gender, and sexuality. The requirement that all people must "do gender" (West and Zimmerman 1987), which is rooted in essentialism and hegemonic masculinity, "erases" transgender men in two ways simultaneously. Doing gender makes transgender men invisible to cisgender gay men. People presenting themselves as men (via masculine dress, comportment, and affect) are assumed to have male genitalia. Additionally, doing gender compels transgender men to perform the ideals of hegemonic masculinity to be addressed as men in society.

Lastly, some cisgender gay men believed they show "know" that a man is transgender; inability to "know" created discomfort for some. Some of the men were encountered *vagina panic* when confronted with sexual desire for transgender men. Essentialism creates an assumption that transgender men's bodies are women's bodies. To experience sexual desire for transgender men created discomfort around coming into contact with female genitalia. Essentialist discourse and hegemonic masculinity work together to prevent social and sexual connections between cisgender gay men and transgender men. In doing so, these barriers also prevent individual relationships as well as political contacts.

This study highlights how the same barriers that transgender men face in society form obstruction to them in the so-called LGBT "community." The interviewees for this project shed light on how intertwined sex, gender, and sexuality in both identity and sexuality formation. Therefore, transgender inclusion in gay male spaces is fraught with anxieties about body configurations – and how to handle the desiring of bodies that, for some, are unintelligible. The demands put on transgender men to look, be, and act like (cisgender) men also create their invisibility in society. Likewise, this invisibility creates an impasse. Being able to traverse through different social and sexual spaces, as this project illustrates, does not mean that transgender people will be integrated and accepted. Even with interviewees whose definition of manhood did not solely focus on biological aspects of a person, the discourses available to them on gender, sex, and sexuality made it difficult to see transgender men as viable sexual partners. In other words, the inclusion of transgender people in society will need to hinge on more than just education around sex



and gender as separate concepts. In fact, this study shows that people come to understand themselves through emotionally investing in essentialist conceptions of sex, gender, and sexuality which are simultaneously informed and intertwined with each other. Therefore, the LGBT movement's current focus on transgender issues and transgender rights may need to focus less on separating sex and gender and more on expanding the conversation around the desirability of different body configurations for both cisgender and transgender men and women.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Several limitations for this project that should be noted. My sample is small, consisting of only 15 cisgender gay men. I provide some insights into the ways in which cisgender gay men view transgender men. Follow-up studies should focus on the intra-group interactions between other members of the LGBT community. For example, how do cisgender lesbians view transgender lesbians within their communities? Alternatively, how do transgender men understand their position within the gay male community? Furthermore, since the location of San Francisco is unique for its more liberal environment for sexual minorities in the United States, studies should investigate different locations in the United States (whether another urban city or a rural town). Lastly, the sample for this project was overwhelmingly white men. Follow-up studies should include the perspectives of cisgender gay men of color.

## APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. What is your name and age?
2. Where did you grow up?
3. Can you tell me about your childhood and your relationship with your family?
4. What is your highest level of education and current occupation?
5. Can you tell me about when you first began to understand your sexuality? How was this process for you?
6. How do you currently identify your sexuality?
7. Can you tell me about how your current sexuality is similar and/or different from when you first became sexually aware?
8. Can you tell me about how you understand the relationship between sex, gender, and sexuality?
9. Has this changed over time? If so, can you tell me about that process and what it was like for you?
10. Have you met a transgender man in queer/gay spaces such as bars, events, parties, etc.? If so, what was that like for you?
11. Do you currently or have you had friendships, sexual contact, or romantic relationships with transgender men? What are/were these relationships like for you?
12. Have you heard other gay men talk about transgender men? What are your impressions of other gay men's views about transgender men?

13. Have you had conversations with people you know about transgender men? What were these conversations like?
14. Can you tell me your thoughts on transgender men who have sex with gay men? What about transgender men in gay male social spaces and the dynamics between transgender men and gay men? For example, are there any changes that you've seen happening (whether good or bad, in your opinion) since transgender men are in gay male social spaces?
15. What do you think the future holds for these two groups of men and how do you see this working for the larger LGBT movement?

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